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The Matter of Common Authorship in the Cotton Nero
Manuscript's Poems and *Saint Erkenwald*

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Introduction

The purpose of this work is to comprehend the authorship of the four poems of the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript: *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In addition, it shall be examined the authorship of another poem associated to these four poems: *Saint Erkenwald*. This study stems from the need to resolve the issues of common authorship of the five texts, which is still greatly debated by scholars. Moreover, it will be taken into account the likely context of composition of these poems, that is the fourteenth century England, characterised by a theological dispute on salvation and afterlife: it should give a contribute for the authorship examination.

With the discovery of Cotton Nero A.x manuscript and the growing notoriety of the poems contained in it, *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, scholars have been trying to understand if these compositions were elaborated by the same unknown author, or if, for whatever reason, they were collected and put together by the scribe who copied the texts into the codex. In order to solve this question and to develop the debate on common authorship, scholars have taken into consideration some points. Although identifying a precise person as the author of the texts is impracticable for the lack of evidence, studying the poems through their contents and their formal aspects can help us to determine at least whether they are the product of the same poet or not. The first two chapters of this work shall try to investigate these matters. Through the first one, the Cotton Nero codex will be analysed, focusing on: the history of the manuscript and its physical features; the language in which the texts have been copied, which differs from that of the original composition; the context of the Alliterative Revival, a literary movement of which three of the poems, *Cleanness*, *Patience* and *Sir Gawain* are representative; the hypotheses in authorship attribution developed by scholars in these years. The second chapter, after a description of the main literary features of every single poem of the Cottonian codex, will present the metrical patterns of the poems, and the comparison of the four texts. This comparison shall be based on the formal and stylistic elements, and on the literary themes. By the results of this comparison, it would be possible to estimate the authorship of these texts, whether common or not. This theory, even if the authorship cannot be completely confirmed for the lack of witnesses besides the Cotton Nero manuscript, should be reliable

because of the comparison with other Middle English texts of the tradition, showing relevant results. In addition, the sources of the poem are being evidenced.

After the study of the authorship of the poems of the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript, the second question is being faced in the third and last chapter: the common authorship between the Cotton Nero manuscript's poems and another text external to the codex and located in another one, *Saint Erkenwald* in the British Library Ms. Harley 2250. In fact, the analysis of all the five texts presents a set of features that led some scholars to consider *Erkenwald* the fifth known work of the unidentified Cottonian poet. By a further comparison of all the poems, this study intends to establish the authorship of *Saint Erkenwald*, confirming or denying it through the evaluation of those supposed common features linkable to the Cotton Nero's poems. Through the chapter, attention will be focused on: the manuscript of *Erkenwald* and the poem itself; the context of composition of the poem, pointing out the theological debate of the second half of the fourteenth century on the salvation by God; as for the Cottonian poems, the dialect, the meter, and the sources of the text shall be examined. In conclusion, *Erkenwald* is being compared with the four poems of the Cotton Nero A.x. The analysis should provide evidence for the authorship of the poem and resolve the debate. A further comparison will conclude the study: referring to the already mentioned theological debate, it will be possible to understand conclusively if the text on the saint was written by the same man of the other four texts, or, whether the different authorship, if, actually, there was a literary debate on the theological question of the period, thus suggesting a dialogue between the poems.

In order to develop this study, I have chosen as reference editions that of Andrew and Waldron (2007) for the Cottonian poems, since it is the most recent and the most accurate. As regards *Sain Erkenwald*, I have selected Peterson's edition (1977), because, though not recent, it still remains the most used and mentioned in the debate, referring to it as the most reliable. Moreover, sources of different fields have been considered. Among them, for instance, there are the studies on the language (Davis 1967), on the meter (Duggan 1997), on the theological aspect in the poems (Rhodes 2001), and on the literary devices and themes (Anderson 2005). The sum of all the sources should help to investigate the matter of common authorship, for both the Cottonian poems and *Saint Erkenwald*. In addition, it will be applied the stylometric analysis by Stylo R: it is useful to provide a first hypothesis for the authorship of the pomes, for the *Pearl*, *Cleanness*,

Patience and *Sir Gawain* first, and for *Saint Erkenwald* together with the Cottonian poems then, considering the vocabulary of the texts. However, a qualitative examination is following, since the stylometric evidence could not be sufficient.

Chapter 1

Cotton Nero A.x

1.1 The manuscript

If we want to discuss on the *Gawain*-poet (or *Pearl*-poet), without taking into account *Saint Erkenwald* for now, it is necessary to start talking about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl*, *Cleanness* and *Patience*, the presumed works of this unknown author, and the codex which preserves them, the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript. This manuscript is peculiar, for it is the only surviving manuscript to contain solely alliterative poems in Middle English.¹ It is a small (171 x 123 mm), rather plain, quarto volume, written on vellum.² Its smallness is emphasized by the fact that it was apparently cropped at some point in its binding history. In its current condition, it comprises only ninety vellum leaves, consisting of seven gatherings of twelve leaves, preceded by a single bifolium and concluded by a gathering of four leaves.³

The four poems are disposed in this order inside the manuscript: *Pearl* (folios 41-59^v), *Cleanness* (also called *Purity*; folios 61-86), *Patience* (folios 87-94), and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (folios 95-128^v). Like several other texts from Middle Ages, the titles do not appear in the manuscript but were given by modern editors. Nonetheless, it is clear where a poem ends and where the next one begins by parchments left blank between a text and one other. At a later time, these blank leaves, and other pages subsequently added at the beginning and at the end of the codex, as Burrow suggests⁴, have been used by an illustrator to depict some focal scenes from the four poems, twelve overall. J. J. Anderson states in the introduction of his edition of the Cotton Nero A.x that:

¹ This topic shall be discussed later in a more specific way. Anyway, I think it is quite relevant the fact that the manuscript is exclusively filled with alliterative poems, though *Pearl* is not written in the alliterative verse pattern. This might suggest a common authorship, on the basis that the four poems were acknowledged by the scribe as the works of the same man, despite the different meter of *Pearl*.

² Andrew and Waldron 2007, 1.

³ Edwards 1997, 197. A theory involves that the Cottonian poems belonged to the Ricardian culture, and when King Richard was deposed by the cousin, the future Henry IV, all this culture had been condemned to a sort of *damnatio memoriae*. Therefore, the quality and the dimensions of the manuscript might be linkable to these facts, even if they cannot be proved.

⁴ Burrow 2001, 2.

The manuscript itself is unremarkable except for the fact that there are coloured illustrations to the poems, rather crudely drawn and often careless of detail, which appear to have been done to fill up blank pages and spaces before and after the text.⁵

Nonetheless, even if these illustrations were “crudely drawn and often careless of detail”, they still remain another peculiarity of this manuscript. In fact, it is one of the very few illustrated manuscripts from that period.⁶ And, since illustrated manuscripts tend to be large and beautiful, the relative modesty of the Cotton manuscript had led some scholars to suggest that it may be a copy of another manuscript, a deluxe edition.⁷

Cotton Nero A.x is not a holograph and, indeed, it was compiled after a certain amount of time the original transcription of the poems it contains. A. S. G. Edwards proposes this about the manuscript and its contents:

They were all written by a single scribe, [...]. This scribe apparently copied the manuscript as a single construct, rather than a series of discrete units: there is no correlation between the various texts and quire boundaries. His transcription seems to have been generally careful, although it is not possible to establish how many of the manifest errors made in the course of copying were introduced by him or existed in his exemplar. There are a number of indications of erasure and correction, some possibly by another, perhaps, later hand.⁸

We have no way of determining how many stages of copying precede the manuscript. There are many smaller, manifest scribal errors, more than four hundred, many involving mechanical transcriptional failures. Many of these can be emended to recover the original reading. But other textual anomalies may be the consequences of a more extensive transmissional history and the consequent occasions of corruption.

The precise period in which the Cotton Nero manuscript was written down is not entirely certain, but it is thought to date back to the second half of the fourteenth century or the beginning of the fifteenth century. The inscription at the end of *Sir Gawain*, “HONY SOYT QUI MAL PENCE”

⁵ Anderson 2005, ix.

⁶ Andrew and Waldron 2007, 1.

⁷ Mathew 1968, 117. This theory is impossible to demonstrate, but it is likely that there were other copies of these poems. Again, it can be attributable to an erasure of the poems for cultural matters.

⁸ Edwards 1997, 197. Later I shall discuss the modifications the poet introduced in the poems through dialect and the metrical evidence.

(folio 124^v), the motto of the Order of the Garter⁹ founded by Edward III in about 1348, provides the earliest possible date for the transcription of the volume itself. Anyway, the question is still not solved because of the impossibility to attest that the inscription was copied at the same time as the text or by the same scribe. On palaeographical grounds, the manuscript can be dated to the second half of the fourteenth century. There have been attempts to push the transcription forward into the early fifteenth century, largely on the basis of the illustrations, particularly of styles of clothing which include details not recorded before this later date. But since the illustrations were added later to the manuscript, as said before, they offer little assistance in dating the transcription of the poems themselves. The hand of the scribe has not been identified in other manuscripts and there is no clue concerning his identity or the motives that led to his transcription.¹⁰

The only copies of the four compositions are preserved into the Cotton Nero A.x. This is unusual if we consider that, on the contrary, the works of that same period such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Langland's *Piers Plowman*, or Gower's *Confessio Amantis* were preserved in many copies, being available to the early printers, thus becoming part of the canon of the English writers, and reaching our days. Since the poems of the *Gawain*-poet, as mentioned before, survive only in a single volume, they were known only by few readers.¹¹ However, we have to assume that *Sir Gawain* circulated. In fact, linguistical parallels have been found between it and a poem by the fifteenth-century northern poet, Humfrey Newton. There had also been a reworking of the narrative with the fifteenth-century romance called *The Grene Knight*, in the mid-seventeenth-century Percy Folio manuscript¹², containing, in general, popular re-adaptations. Despite this, we have no way of knowing for certain whether this circulation depends at all on the surviving Cotton manuscript, or rather on some other copy or version of the poem now lost.¹³ Therefore, we may consider these two poems as pieces of evidence of a continued circulation for the poem. *Pearl*, *Cleanness* and *Patience*, conversely, had left no echo before the manuscript became renown: in the second half of the fourteenth century, when they

⁹ The most senior order of knighthood in the British honours system. The Order is dedicated to the image and arms of Saint George, England's patron saint.

¹⁰ Edwards 1997, 198-199.

¹¹ See Burrow 2001, 1-2, for the matter of the circulation of the poems. He is one of those scholars who think the four poems were erased after the end of the kingdom of Richard II.

¹² British Library Add. MS 27879, 203-10. The text in this manuscript is very different from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it less remarkable. However, it demonstrates that the poem circulated, in particular for the reason that *Gawain* was the first composition to present the figure of Green Knight, which in older romances, the sources of the poem, is a completely different character, though the role is the same.

¹³ Edwards 1997, 198. Though it cannot be assumed for sure where the poems circulated, it is believed that the poet worked in London. In the poems it is possible to notice that the poet knew dialects different from his own.

were composed, the poems never achieved the same popularity and wide publication of those works we defined earlier part of the canon of the English writers, as evidenced by the fact they survive in only one copy. Even if the four poems of the Cotton manuscript were not included in the canon for a poor circulation, it was previously stated that the volume had its readers and owners. In order to introduce this issue, it is necessary to point out that the dialect of the scribe has been quite precisely localized to a part of Cheshire. Nonetheless, while the scribal dialect does not necessarily reveal the place of actual writing, it does seem consistent with possible topographical allusions in *Sir Gawain*. Otherwise there are no clear indications of the early ownership of the manuscript. A theory of a first ownership originates starting from a marginal inscription: “Hugo de”. It is written in the upper margin of the recto of the first leaf of *Sir Gawain* (folio 95). It has been claimed that the name “J. Macy” appears in the marginal decoration on folios 62^v and 114. Even before this discovery, the Masseys had been placed at the heart of the debate on the matter on the manuscript’s ownership and commission. Forms of the name have been discerned in anagrams in *Pearl* and in *Saint Erkenwald*. However, these conjectures are groundless. The history of the Cotton manuscript is unknown before the early seventeenth century. The important research of Edward Wilson¹⁴ do provide some grounds for believing that the Cotton manuscript may have been owned by and, indeed, written for the Stanley family of Staffordshire and Cheshire, a family that had interest in vernacular literature. However, the earliest specific reference to it occurs in a list of manuscripts made before 1614 by a Yorkshire book collector, Henry Saville of Banke (1568-1617). In the list it is written “An owld booke in English verse beginninge Perle plesant to Princes pay in 4^o. Limned”: it is the quotation of the first line of *Pearl*, the first poem in the volume; as can be noted, it is also explained that the “book” is a quarto with illustrations. After Saville, the volume passed to Sir Robert Bruce Cotton (1586-1631) on 1621. In that year it was recorded in his library catalogue, described as “Gesta Arthuri regis et aliorum versu anglico”¹⁵ (deeds of King Arthur and other matters in English verse).¹⁶ Finally, the manuscript was donated to the British Museum. Its name owes to the position it occupied in Cotton’s Westminster library, that is the tenth place on the top shelf of a bookcase surmounted by a bust of the emperor Nero. Perhaps the codex remained pretty unnoticed over the seventeenth and most of the eighteenth centuries, until twelve lines from

¹⁴ See Wilson 1979 for the theory on the Stanley family.

¹⁵ British Library MS Harley 6018 (“Catalogus Librorum Manuscriptorum in Bibliotheca Roberti Cottoni 1621”), fol. 112v.

¹⁶ Edwards 1997, 198.

Pearl and four lines from *Cleanness* were printed in the third volume of Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry*, 1781. These are the first lines ever printed from the Cotton Nero poems. In this volume, *Pearl* is termed as an alliterative "Vision on vellum", and *Cleanness* is described as "an alliterative poem without rhyme, exactly in the versification of *Piers Plowman*, of equal or higher antiquity". The first appearance of *Sir Gawain* was in 1824, again in Warton's *History*, but in the new edition by Richard Price, who mentioned the discovery of an alliterative romance on Sir Gawain. The first complete edition of *Sir Gawain* was published in 1839 by Sir Frederic Madden, under a pseudo-medieval title "Sir Gawayn and the Grene Knyzt". In 1864, with the names "Pearl", "Cleanness", and "Patience", the other three poems of the Cotton Nero manuscript were published too in their first edition by Richard Morris. These two editions, Madden's *Sir Gawain*, and Morris' *Pearl, Cleanness, and Patience*, became the models and the starting points of numerous later editions. In particular, Morris was the first scholar to consider all the four poems composed by one poet and claimed that this poet could stand in the foremost rank of England's early bards. Despite their linguistic peculiarity, the poems gained notoriety and soon were appreciated by scholars and antiquarians, especially *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain*, of which many literary studies have been published in the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁷ Earlier we have introduced the question of the transmission of the texts in the manuscript. This matter is related to another relevant issue: whether the poems the codex contains have been copied together right from their original composition, or whether they were brought together at some later point in their textual transmissional history. Oakden suggests that each of the four poems was originally copied separately and postulates several stages of intervening copying for each of them before their appearance together in Cotton Nero A.x.¹⁸ The issue has an evident importance for the assumption of common authorship upon which most modern scholarship operates. If these poems were only collocated together at a relatively late point in their textual histories, the assumption of common authorship would become less certain. However, the actual state of affairs precludes us to resolve these textual and attributional problems. But it is sensible to be aware of them and to be conscious of the fact that modern forms of presentation for the poems in this manuscript as the works of "the *Pearl*-poet" or "the *Gawain*-poet" are not necessarily based on evidence that is as reliable as we would wish it to be. There are other ways

¹⁷ Burrow 2001, 2-3.

¹⁸ Oakden 1935, II. 261-63. Oakden's theory may be true, but the reasons for the poems were copied together is more relevant. In fact, if the poet is the same author for all the four poems, it is unlikely that they were written at once. That is why, whether possible, Oakden's theory is quite irrelevant.

in which the forms in which we encounter these poems in modern editions are misleading, ways that may affect matters of literary interpretation.¹⁹ Thus, in this study, for the reasons I just mentioned, the issue of the authorship will not be approached in terms of hypothesis on a specific name of the author beyond this chapter, indicating only the main suppositions. Instead, firstly concerning the poems of the Cotton Nero manuscript, and secondly *Saint Erkenwald*, the matter of common authorship shall be undertaken later, partially already in this chapter, with regard to common textual and linguistic features.

1.2 The alliteration

Before it was said the four poems in the Cotton Nero A.x lack of an authorial identity. Virtually all of them might have a different authorship, even if unlikely. Therefore, if we want to establish a first common aspect of these texts, the most significant is undoubtedly alliteration. A first basic definition of alliteration we may provide is that of alliteration as a literary device where two or more words in a phrase or line share the same beginning consonant sound. All the vowels alliterate together. It is important to use the term “alliteration” when we discuss the common features shared by all the four poems, and to differentiate it from the concept of “alliterative verse”. As a matter of fact, *Pearl* follows a different metrical system compared to the other three compositions. Indeed, the verse of *Pearl* belongs to that type of octosyllabic, four-stress poetry to be found also among the works of poets such as Chaucer. *Gawain*, *Cleanness* and *Patience*, instead, employ the longer, unrhymed alliterative line, belonging to what modern scholars call Alliterative Revival. The metrical tradition of *Pearl*, along with most post-medieval English verse, but also Middle English authors like Chaucer, had its origins in medieval Latin and French writings. Chaucer and his successors looked to the verse of the continental French and Italian courts as models and sources for enriching the versification of English.²⁰ On the other hand, alliterative verse is typical of the Germanic languages and cultures. In the fifth century, the Anglo-Saxon peoples who colonized Britain brought with them this common Germanic tradition of verse-making, and all the poetry that survives from England before the Norman Conquest exhibits these already well-established techniques. All the Old English poetry is alliterative. However, after the Conquest, this ancient native tradition had to compete increasingly with the new continental ways of composing poetry; and for about three hundred years after 1066, the

¹⁹ Edwards 1997, 200.

²⁰ See Scase 2009, 19, for a deep insight of the metrical tradition of *Pearl* and Chaucer.

record of alliterative verse is scarce and fragmentary. Yet, a very large body of alliterative verse survives from late medieval England, composed from about the middle of the fourteenth century until the beginning of the sixteenth. In terms of topics dealt, the Old English tradition continued, and others had been added with the Alliterative Revival:

The subject matter of alliterative poetry had already widened in Old English times; after England was converted to Christianity, stories from the Old and New Testaments were retold in verse in the native language. This expansion continued in Middle English. New alliterative poems were composed about the legendary Celtic king Arthur, the siege of Troy, and the life of Alexander the Great. The alliterative works of the *Gawain*-poet include adaptations of biblical materials, such as the story of Jonah and the whale in *Patience* and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and Belshazzar's feast in *Cleanness*. The drama of the rhyming poem *Pearl* is shaped by Christian doctrines about salvation and the eternal bliss of heaven; and the narrative of *Sir Gawain* takes place in two communities, the courts of King Arthur and of Lord Bertilak, where the birth of Jesus is celebrated at Christmas, and masses are frequently sung.²¹

Another important topic of the fourteenth-century alliterative poetry is *amour courtois*, hence knights and ladies were involved in relationships. It is a remarkable innovation because women were treated as important characters in fictional narratives. Taking into account the *Gawain*-poet, the seduction scenes in *Gawain* are renowned: the Lady, Bertilak's wife, tempts Sir Gawain in his bedroom three times. In this specific case, we have a temptation and the subsequent test, so the combination of the topics of courtly love and chivalric code.

Returning to alliterative poetry and its record, with the chief exception of Langland, most of the authors who wrote using the alliterative meter remain anonymous, but the majority of them must, on the evidence of their dialects, have originated away from London and the south-east: Langland in the west country, the Cotton Nero poet in the North-West Midlands (the possible origin of the *Gawain*-poet, on a dialectical basis, shall be further discussed). On this regard, Marie Borroff maintained that,

²¹ See Borroff 2011, xxiii. From this citation, it is possible to observe that the themes in the four poems are similar. Later this topic shall be furtherly examined.

By the second half of the fourteenth century, during the productive lifetimes of both Chaucer and the *Gawain*-poet, French-style metrical patterns and French-style end rhyme prevailed in poetry in the south of England. Bards proficient in alliterative verse no longer performed at court or at the residences of the noble lords corresponding to the chieftains of Anglo-Saxon times. Nor was alliterative poetry widely read, with the important exception of Langland's *Piers Plowman*, a popular allegorical poem treating issues of social injustice and corruption from the point of view of the lower classes.²²

In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the Parson says, "I am a Southren man; | I kan nat geeste "rum, ram, ruf" by letter" (X 42-3). This only makes sense if southern men (Chaucer himself included) were not expected to produce "rum, ram, ruf". It is clear from this quote that the alliterative verse was not employed in London, and in general in the south of England. This implies that alliterative verse was associated with the northern and western provinces, an association borne out by the dialect of some alliterative poems. As his imitation of it in the course of the *Knight's Tale* shows, Chaucer knew some alliterative verse (though probably not the Cotton Nero poems), and the Parson's reference to "rum, ram, ruf" is accurate enough to show that three words are alliterating together. Their purpose is to bind into one the two halves into which each line divides, with two words in the first half-line alliterating with one in the second, thus (*Gawain* 653):

His clannes and his cortaysye croked were neuer.

Metrically, alliteration must normally fall on stressed syllables, of which there are four in this kind of line, two in each half. A general rule, to which there are few exceptions, requires alliteration in the second half-line to fall solely on the first of its two stresses. The first half-line is more variable and may have three stressed syllables. Two of these must alliterate, but three of them may, as in *Gawain* 2:

The borȝ brittened and brent to brondez and askez.

Whereas the number of stressed syllables in a line is thus restricted to four or five, there is no overall count of unstressed syllables. In addition, the distribution of unstressed syllables in

²² Borroff 2011, xxi-xxiii. I do not totally agree with Borroff. It cannot be proved, but it is likely that the poet of the Cotton Nero manuscript was known in the South. I think that Langland was not the exception.

relation to the stresses is very variable. Taking into account the two just cited lines from *Gawain*, we notice these variations²³:

x//xx/ | x/xx/x

The bor3 brittened and brent to brondez and askez

x/xxx/xx | /xx/x

His clannes and his cortaysye croked were neuer

Each half-line is independent in its pattern, creating an effect of continuous variation in terms of rhythm. In order to achieve the alliteration on a range of sounds, a wide and rich vocabulary with synonyms and specialized words was required. Poets displayed their virtuosity by deploying that specialized vocabulary, drawing on sets of poetic alternative words for common items such as “man” or “go”. The three Cotton Nero poems, for instance, use the following distinct words when referring to male persons: *burne*, *hathel*, *lede*, *schalk*, *segge*, *tulk*, *wyze*. In the present case, actually, these were not real synonyms, but the choice between them was largely determined by what the alliteration needed to be fulfilled.²⁴ Other semantic fields used by the alleged poet of the Cotton Nero A.x are, for instance, those of hunting, armour, weaponry, courtly costume, and topography in *Gawain*, those of courtly life and clergy, or the language of lapidary, which dealt with the names, meanings, and properties of precious stones, in *Pearl*.²⁵ Poets also made use of traditional expressions for the construction of half-lines. In the first half-line, where two alliterating sounds are required, it is common to find certain pairs of words, or “collocations”, which provide them. Thus, the word *ryse* is coupled with the adverb *radly* (“promptly”) seven times in *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Gawain*:

With þat þay ros vp radly, as þay rayke schulde; (*Cleanness* 671)

Þenne he ryses radly and raykes bilyue; (*Patience* 89)

And he ful radly vpros, and ruchched hym fayre; (*Gawain* 367)

²³ Burrow 2001, 20-21. For a more technical and specific explication of the alliterative long line, see Duggan 1997, 221-223.

²⁴ Burrow 2001, 22. Scase 2009, 19-20. Later we shall see that these terms are essential for the analysis of the four poems in matter of authorship.

²⁵ Scase 2009, 20.

There are also less obvious forms of patterning in both first and second half-lines, even at the very abstract level where particular types of half-line rhythm are associated with particular patterns of syntax and grammar (grammetrical patterns).²⁶ The poets' choice of words as well as of their order and placement was determined partly by what they wished to say, partly by considerations of alliterative collocations, and partly by rhythmic concerns.²⁷

Usually, half-lines coincide with units of syntax and sense and so can be easily identified, therefore marking the *caesura* is unnecessary. The line-ends, too, commonly coincide with such phrasal boundaries. So, the overall effect is one of a continuous string of half-lines, linked in pairs by alliteration, but subject to no higher formal constraints.²⁸

The Late Middle English alliterative tradition virtually ceased to be productive after the fourteenth century. When printing came to England at the end of the fifteenth century, the poetry of Chaucer, which was preserved in many manuscripts, entered the classical canon of published poetry in English.²⁹ Conversely, poems in alliterative verse were spread no longer, since not printed. On this matter, Wendy Scase reports how the first editor of Malory's *Morte Darthur* found some problems in the publication due to the meter and the language used:

Some variation in the acceptability of alliterative meter is suggested by comparisons of the Winchester manuscript of Malory's *Morte Darthur* with Caxton's print of it. Malory drew in part on the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, retaining traces of its distinctive alliterative vocabulary in his text. But Caxton's edition eliminates these traces, which suggests that, although acceptable to Malory, they seemed to Caxton too archaic, or dialectal, to please his market. Caxton's project was to reach as wide an audience as possible. He needed an English that would transcend regional differences because of the commercial pressures of printing. His is one of the projects of linguistic improvement which imagines and attempts to reach a supra-local or regional audience.

From this passage, we understand that the texts written in a south-eastern dialect had major possibilities to be spread and understood, in particular by the court and the nobles of the south. In fact, *Piers Plowman* achieved distribution across the different regions of England for its

²⁶ Burrow 2001, 22. Grammetrical patterns shall be discussed later in chapter 2.

²⁷ Duggan 1997, 230. The formulaic nature indicates fixed structures in the four poems. Despite this, the poet shows his originality.

²⁸ Burrow 2001, 22. This feature, however, is not valid for *Pearl*, for its meter.

²⁹ Borroff 2011, xxiv. As seen for Malory, printing obstructed the circulation of alliterative verse poems.

dialect, despite the meter. On the other side, texts in northern or western dialect were “normalised” in the south-eastern dialect, like Malory’s poem, or, of course, forgotten, that is what happened for a long time to the poems of the Cotton Nero manuscript.³⁰

1.3 The language of the Cotton Nero manuscript’s poems

The second main aspect which I am going to discuss is the language used in the poems preserved in the manuscript, that is the dialect of the scribe, the dialect of the poet, and the vocabulary employed. Linguistically, the four texts of the manuscript appear homogeneous, but that may be due to the transcription of the poems into the manuscript.

1.3.1 The poet’s vocabulary

Concerning the poet’s vocabulary, many scholars have studied it, but achieving different results. Despite this, estimates of the constituents of poet’s vocabulary vary only within a few percentage points: the largest group of words derived from Old English (60-70%), then from Old French (22-30%), Old Norse (8-10%) and under one percent from other sources.³¹ Norman Hinton in 1987 and 1989 made a computer-based investigation on the same subject. He first established a computerized database, initially consisting of a large sampling from the *Middle English Dictionary* from the letters A-M and eventually from A-SIM. Over 5,400 randomly selected words were entered with searchable fields for etymology, parts of speech, and the dates at which they are first attested in Middle English. In a second moment, the database was supplemented with glossaries to the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, the Vernon manuscript of *Piers Plowman A*, and *William of Palerne*. The results showed the following etymological structure of Middle English³²:

Germanic: 35.06%; Romance: 64.54%; Other: 0.35%

Chaucer’s vocabulary sources were in the following distribution:

Germanic: 38.5%; Romance: 61.2%; Other: 0.09%

³⁰ Scase 2009, 21. From this passage, it is clear that the unknown poet may have been forgotten for his language, besides the theoretical political reasons.

³¹ See Oakden 1930, I. 85-86. Gordon 1953, 97-106. Anderson 1969, 73; 1977, 108. Davis 1967, 138-43. Vantuono 1984, I. 373-74 for studies on the vocabulary in Middle English.

³² See Hinton 1989. Hist study is one of the most innovative, and for this reason I report it.

The poems in Cotton Nero A.x presented a much higher proportion of native terms:

Germanic: 58.7%; Romance: 41%; Other: 0.15%

Hinton's database allows the comparison of the constituents of a poet's vocabulary with that of the language as a whole at various times. The distribution in Chaucer's works of Germanic and Romance words appears to be closer to the Middle English of 1460 than to the language when he actually wrote. On the other hand, the *Gawain*-poet's vocabulary reflects the etymological mixture of Middle English as of 1390. Therefore, the research attests that the latter's poetic diction is seventy years older than the diction of Chaucer. Hinton argues that this suggests a conscious effort on the part of the *Gawain*-poet to use an older stage of the language.³³ It is more likely that the alliterative poet's older lexicon reflects both the numerical preponderance of Germanic elements and the shaping of the tradition of grammatical frames and semantic formulae in the century before the earliest extant Middle English long line poetry.³⁴ It is remarkable the intensive use of Old Norse vocabulary, more than the usual in Middle English poetry. Instead, the grammatical Old Norse words are very few. For instance, in *Gawain* we have: *þay* (used regularly); *þayr(es)* (three times; the more common English word is *her, hor*); *þoʒ, þof* (twice; usually English *paʒ*); the ending *-ande* from the Old Norse *-andi*. In any case, the large use of Old Norse terms is attributable to the meter of *Cleanness, Patience* and *Gawain*, the alliterative long line, typical of the Germanic poetic tradition, and, as consequence, of the Old Norse poetry.³⁵

1.3.2 The scribe and the poet's dialects

As regards the dialect, generally we can maintain that that used to write the poems in the Cotton Nero manuscript is identifiable as the West Midlands' dialect. By later dialect studies, in particular McIntosh's³⁶, it has been established a more precise location: South-East Cheshire or North-East Staffordshire. It has sometimes been assumed that this serves to identify the precise area from which the poet originated. Such assumptions should, however, be used with caution, since there is plenty of evidence to indicate that scribes tended to impose their own dialectal

³³ Hinton 1987, 85.

³⁴ Duggan 1997, 238. A more striking proof is the employment of this set of features, and how it is different from other alliterative verse poems.

³⁵ Davis 1967, 138-141.

³⁶ McIntosh 1963, 5. This study is relevant for the authorship comparison with other texts.

habits and preferences on the works they copied. Thus, the dialect of the Cotton Nero A.x indicates the dialect of the scribe rather than that of the poet. Comparison of the manuscript forms with the rhyme evidence in *Pearl*, with alliterative long line in *Patience* and *Cleanness*, with rhyme and alliteration in *Gawain*, and with the rhythmic structures of all four poems provides our best evidence for distinguishing the poet's language from that of the scribe.³⁷ Detailed studies of the morphology appearing in rhyme words and alliteration, where the scribe's freedom to modify the texts would have been limited, suggest that the poet's own dialect may be collocated further to the south of the scribe's one, probably in Staffordshire.³⁸ Here I provide the main linguistical features owed to the scribe's dialect present in the manuscript, as Moorman does in his critical edition³⁹:

1. Articles: Indefinite: *a; an* or *on* before vowels and *h*.

Definite: *þe; þo, þose* in pl.

2. Demonstratives: Adjective: sing. *þat*, pl. *þose*.

Pronoun: sing. *þis*, pl. *þis, þise, þese*.

3. Personal pronouns:

		SINGULAR		PLURAL
1st	nom.	I		we
	gen.	my, myn		oure
	dat. acc.	me		us
2nd	nom.	þou, þu		ȝe
	gen.	þy, þyn		ȝoure
	dat. acc.	þe, þu		ȝow
		SINGULAR		PLURAL
		<i>Masculine</i>	<i>Feminine</i>	<i>Neuter</i>
3rd	nom.	he	ho, scho	hit
	gen.	his	hir, her	his
	dat. acc.	him	hir, her	hit
				þay
				her, hor, þayr
				hom, hem, him

³⁷ Duggan 1997, 222. This study shall be taken into account again, since it allows a real acknowledgment of the poet's language.

³⁸ Andrew and Waldron 2007, 1-2.

³⁹ Linguistic chart taken from Moorman 1977, 48-50.

4. Indefinite pronouns: *mon, men, who, quo, what.*

5. Relative pronouns: *whom, wham, quom, þat.*

6. Nouns:

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
nom. acc.	e, -	(e)ʒ (e)s, esse, en, us, e, r
gen.	(e)s, (e)ʒ, e, -	(e)ʒ, (e)s, en

7. Adjectives: no case or gender; pl. in *e*, often dropped.

8. Verbs: Infinitive: *en, e, y.*

Participles: pres., *ande, yng*; past, *en, n, e* (strong verbs)
d, t (weak verbs)

Pres. Ind.	SINGULAR	PLURAL
1st	e, (e)ʒ, -	(e)n, e, (e)ʒ, tʒ, -
2nd	(e)ʒ	
3rd	ʒ, s, tʒ	

Past Ind. Strong verbs: sing. no ending; pl. *on, e, en.*

Weak verbs:	SINGULAR	PLURAL
1st	de, te	(e)d, (e)t
2nd	des, tes	
3rd	de, te	

Imperative: *e, -*; pl. *eʒ, es*

The verb "to be":

Infinitive: *ben, be*

Present indicative

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
1st	am	ar, arn, ben
2nd	art	
3rd	is	

Past indicative

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
1st	watʒ	wer, weren, were, wern
2nd	watʒ, were	
3rd	watʒ	

The scribe's use of the yogh needs explanation. It represents both the voiceless fricative [x] as in *knyʒt* and *aʒt* and the voiced front spirant or semi-vowel [j] (Chaucer's *y*) as in *ʒere*. It represents also the sounds [w] and [u], usually after *a* or *o* plus *l* or *r* as in *soʒe*. Moreover, *ʒ* could be voiceless [s] or [z] in final position as in *frendeʒ* or *watʒ*.

Qu has the phonetic value of *wh* [hw]. In this way, we find both *quyl* and *whyle*. *W* sometimes is [u] as in *nwe*, *v* and *w* are occasionally confused as in *awyse*, and *c* is sometimes used for *s* as in *falce*.⁴⁰

Now that the main linguistic features have been illustrated, we can examine the differences between the scribe's dialect and the poet's. Earlier we said McIntosh's early placement of the manuscript was in South-East Cheshire or just over the border in North-East Staffordshire. Some years later, Charles Jones argued that the manuscript was likely to have been composed in the very small area in North Staffordshire. Using the term "composed", Jones confused and overlapped the poet, the scribe and their respective dialects. In fact, from the beginnings of modern scholarship of these poems, editors have tended to assume essential identity between the scribal dialect and that of the poet, starting from Richard Morris.⁴¹ It would appear true, since both the scribe's and poet's dialects were North-West Midlands. Nonetheless, Duggan, returning to what Morris and the other scholars who asserted the correspondence between author and scribe, maintains that the question is not so clear as it seems:

The matter is complicated by the fact that the scribal dialect is more homogenous than that of the poet, since the *Gawain*-poet, like other poets who composed alliterative verse, made use of a variety of phonological, morphological, and stress doublets from other dialects to meet the demands of alliteration and verse rhythms.⁴²

⁴⁰ Moorman 1977, 50-51.

⁴¹ Jones 1972; Morris 1869. A similar approach leads to assume that the *Gawain*-poet the author of *Saint Erkenwald*.

⁴² Duggan 1997, 240. As anticipated earlier, the poet made use of different linguistic forms, even from other dialects.

Then, he provides a number of examples which demonstrates the differences in the poet's language and in that of the scribe. The poet, for instance, used both /g/ and /j/ forms of *give*, though the latter only once in 22 occurrences, while a more southerly poet like Langland used the /j/ form more frequently than the /g/. The scribe in this case was aware of the double form, spelling the /g/ forms with <g> and the /j/ with <ȝ>. Moreover, the poet knew the linguistic possibilities in adjacent dialects. For instance, he adopts the generally northern *-ez* inflection for the first person singular indicative verb *byswykez* to achieve a feminine rhyme (*Pearl* 568) and first person plural *renowlez* (*Pearl* 1080). In a similar pattern, though his ordinary form is *strete(z)* for "street(s)", he used *stratez* (*Pearl* 1043), a more uncommon form, to rhyme with *fatez*, *datez*, and *-whatez*. Rhyme evidence also shows that the poet's usual form for words with Old English and Old Norse /a:/ was the rounded /ɔ:/, but he occasionally rhymed them with /a/.⁴³ These examples demonstrate that, although the poet's language was a North-West Midland dialect, it is a literary language, with features which are unlikely to have been part of any local speech.

There are other cases, instead, in which the scribe was careless or unaware of the poet's forms, or simply he did not understand them, now substituting his own forms, now maintaining the poet's forms. These divergences are useful for distinguishing the poet's dialect from the scribe's. The most important of these appear in their different uses of final *-e*, their different forms of tonic vowels derived from Old English /y/ and /y:/, and their different realizations of Old English /hw/ and /kw/. All suggest that in the dialect of the scribe final inflectional and etymological *-e* was compulsory, while the poet used *-e* when the context demanded an unstressed syllable. With the reflexes of /y/ and /y:/, the scribe's spellings preserved rounding in many contexts in his dialect, while the rhyme evidence shows both had become unrounded to /i/ or /i:/ in the poet's speech. The scribe often spells the phonetic residues of Old English /hw/ and /kw/ with <wh> and <qu>, and less frequently with <w> alone. As the alliteration shows, the poet used only the /w/ form (*Cleanness* 422, *Patience* 247, 421, *Gawain* 1186, 1227, 1235), locating him more southerly than the Cotton Nero A.x scribe. In addition, even if reflexes of Old English and Old Norse /kw/ had in some northern dialects developed to /xw/ and eventually to /hw/ and /w/, that had not occurred in the poet's dialect. Spellings such as *whene* (*Gawain* 74, 2492), *whyssynes* "cushions" (*Gawain* 877), on the other hand, may indicate that the scribe's usage was shaped in an area where that change had occurred. Davis suggests that the spellings

⁴³ Davis 1967, 135; Gordon 1953, 96.

<qu-> - <qw-> came to represent /w/ in a variety of Middle English dialects and that such spellings do not prove conclusively that the scribe was more northerly than the poet.⁴⁴ Yet, if this evidence is added to the other indications of a discrepancy between scribal and authorial forms, especially final *-e*, the whole suggests a provenance more southerly than that of the manuscript. Anyway, the precise original location of the poems cannot be defined.

A few other minor differences between scribal and authorial forms are unhelpful for localizing the poems but are useful to distinguish the scribal dialect. For instance, glide vowels show up occasionally in all four poems in words like *bereste* “breast” (*Pearl* 854), *dowelle(z)* “dwells” (*Cleanness* 1674, *Gawain* 566, 1075, *Pearl* 69) *boroȝt* “brought” (*Pearl* 628), *dewyne - dowyne* (*Pearl* 11, 326), *selepe* “sleep” (*Pearl* 186). In most instances in all four poems the metrical evidence reveals the glide vowel to be the scribe’s form and not that of the poet.

The cumulative evidence of disjunction between the poet’s dialect and the scribe’s suggests that if the localization of the manuscript is correct and if the poems are not significantly earlier than the manuscript, then the poet’s natal dialect is less likely to have been formed in Cheshire, Lancashire, or Derbyshire than further south in Staffordshire.⁴⁵ However, even assuming that Staffordshire was his native land, we cannot conclusively establish where the poet lived and worked in adulthood.

1.4 Hypotheses in authorship attribution

As seen previously, the authorship of the poems filling the manuscript is more than uncertain, and facing this matter is quite challenging, not only in order to give an identity to that person who may have composed the poems, but also to assume if the texts were actually composed by one person or more by a linguistical and metrical analysis. The latter approach has been introduced in this chapter and shall be furtherly discussed in the following ones. On the contrary, this section faces the issue of the authorship based on the hypothesis of identification of the poet, suggesting a variety of possible names.

If we want to talk about the identity of the poet, it must be assumed that the four poems were composed by the same author (though we do not have the evidence to prove it definitively). The majority of scholars, in fact, have worked and written considering the Cotton Nero’s poems as

⁴⁴ Davis 1967, 132. Examining other Middle English texts, I can confirm the validity of this statement, but the exposed feature is more present in the northern dialects.

⁴⁵ Duggan 1997, 240-242. Hereinafter, this shall be considered the dialect of the *Gawain*-poet, therefore a distinctive proof for the authorship.

if they were composed by the same person, calling him the “*Gawain-poet*” or the “*Pearl-poet*”. Here I repropose Dorothy Everett’s quotation, cited many times by other scholars’ works:

It seems easier to assume a common author than to suppose that two or more men writing in the same locality and the same period, and certainly closely associated with one another, possessed this rare, and one would think, inimitable quality.⁴⁶

Thus, according to Everett, it is not the survival of the four poems in a single manuscript to prove the common authorship, but rather the fact that these texts have been copied as a collection instead of individual copies. However, though a valid hypothesis, this cannot be considered a true proof, since it might be a collection of alliterative poems or of poems composed in a specific dialect. Nonetheless, the fact that the presence of more poets from Staffordshire, or in general West Midlands, in the same period sounds unlikely have been considered by many scholars as a basis for the common authorship theory, leading to other theories regarding the life and the identity of the poet.

According to the indications inferred from the poems regarding the poet’s education, reading, and experience of life, scholars point out that he might have been a minor order clerk at the service of prominent families of West Midlands. It is in this environment, the aristocracy of the region, that in some cases scholars try to find out the context the poet operated in. Such conjectures were sometimes related to specific theories about the flowering of alliterative poetry during the mid to late fourteenth century, which might be associated with the opposition of regional barons to the centralization of royal power in and around London.⁴⁷ They were severely challenged by the publication of Michael J. Bennett’s seminal study of Cheshire and Lancashire society in the late fourteenth century. Bennett demonstrates that the West Midlands, even if it was an area with a distinctive identity, had a relatively low population during that period, and lacked great houses. With his study, he provides large evidence of a particular phenomenon: professional men from the West Midlands migrated to London for work, often at the service of aristocrats originally from the same region. He then highlights the connections of royalty with this part of the country, especially those of Richard II, whose personal guards were Cheshire knights and archers. It has, therefore, seemed reasonable to conjecture that the poet could have

⁴⁶ Everett 1955, 68. I agree with Everett, even more so after the comparison with other texts in 2.3.

⁴⁷ Andrew and Waldron 2007, 7. Even if interesting, such theory is not demonstrable.

been in the service of an aristocrat working in London for the royal court.⁴⁸ John M. Bowers, following Bennet, proposes that the poems would have been specifically identified with the court of Richard II. He argues that their disappearance should be seen in the context of the obliteration of Ricardian culture by Henry IV after he deposed Richard II and seized the throne in 1399. The idea that they may well have been written in London by a poet originally from the West Midlands has been steadily gaining ground during the past twenty years.⁴⁹

As mentioned briefly before, theory of common authorship has led scholars into attempts to discover the poet's name and identity. The earliest of these hypotheses would identify the poet with "Huchoun of the Awle Ryale", a Scottish writer credited by Andrew Wyntoun in his early fifteenth-century *Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland* with the authorship of "the Awntyre off Gawane". This attribution is accepted by the first editor of *Gawain*, Sir Frederic Madden. This theory is firmly rejected by Richard Morris, the first editor of *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience*, on the ground that the dialect of the manuscript indicates a poet writing not in Scotland but in the North-West Midlands. The second person considered as the poet was Ralph Strode, philosopher mentioned by Chaucer at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* (5.1857). This identification was endorsed by Israel Gollancz, one of the most significant early editors of the poems, in his first edition of *Pearl*. The basis for this theory is the following citation from the fifteenth century catalogue of the library of Merton College, Oxford:

Radulphus Strode, nobilis poeta fuit et versificavit librum elegiacum vocatum Phantasma Radulphi.⁵⁰

The *Phantasma Radulphi* is identified as *Pearl*, and its author as Strode. Even with this theory it has been pointed out the lack of evidence.⁵¹ The third hypothesis is different from the others. In an article published in 1928, Oscar Cargill and Margaret Schlauch maintained that *Pearl* is an elegy on the death of Margaret, daughter of John Hastings, Earl of Pembroke, and granddaughter of Edward III. While the logical extension of this hypothesis might have been to proclaim that Hastings was the poet (since in the poem the poet-narrator has lost her daughter), Cargill and Schlauch attributed the composition of *Pearl* to one of the secular clerks working in the Hastings

⁴⁸ Bennet 1983.

⁴⁹ Bowers 2012, 1-13 Among the hypotheses in this section, this is the most remarkable, and, in my opinion, should be examined furtherly in future research. For the Ricardian culture, see also Burrow 1971; Thomas 2020.

⁵⁰ For the early theories, see Madden 1839, 301-4; Gollancz 1891, l-lij; Morris 1864, v-ix.

⁵¹ Andrew 1997, 28.

household. They took into account in particular two men as strong candidates: one named John Donne, the other John Prat: the former was associated with John of Gaunt and the latter was described as “the King’s Minstrel”.⁵² The fourth suggestion was made by Coolidge Otis Chapman in 1932. He attributed the poems to John of Erghome, an Augustinian friar from York who wrote the *Prophecy of John of Bridlington* in Latin verse. This proposal is based mainly on supposed similarities between the reading and outlook of the *Gawain*-poet and of Erghome. None of these hypotheses attracted any lasting support.⁵³

Since the 1950s, speculations on the identity of the *Gawain*-poet have been marked by a series of hypotheses regarding signatures, acrostics, and cryptograms involving the names Hugh and John Massey. The first of these is propounded by Ormerod Greenwood in the introduction to his verse translation of *Gawain*.⁵⁴ He links the family name “Masse”, inscribed in the manuscript of *Saint Erkenwald*, assumed by the scholar to have been written by the *Gawain*-poet, with the inscription “Hugo de” in the Cotton Nero manuscript (folio 91^r), to arrive at the name Hugo de Masse. Greenwood bases the remainder of his argument on numerological evidence, pointing out that the value of “Hugo de Masci” in the medieval alphabet is 101, which matches the number of stanzas in *Pearl* and *Gawain*, and that “Margery Masci”, the alleged name of the maiden in *Pearl*, has twelve letters, and may therefore be related to the use of twelve in the poem, both structural and symbolic. He notes a pattern of puns on “Hugo de” and “Masci” in the text. The Masseys are identified as a family from Cheshire, region which corresponds with the dialect of the manuscript. After a time, this theory is developed in a composite article by Barbara Nolan and David Farley-Hills.⁵⁵ On one hand, Nolan finds an anagram of “I. Masci” and a possible acrostic reading “paye Masci” in the text of *Pearl*, and therefore suggests that the poet’s name was John rather than Hugh; on the other hand, Farley-Hills observes that the poet and clerk Thomas Hoccleve refers in a short poem, addressed to John of Lancaster, son of Henry IV, to one “maister Massy” as a skilled rhetorician and judge of poetry. Clifford Peterson, supporter of the common authorship of the poems in the Cotton Nero manuscript and of *Saint Erkenwald*, in two articles first detects an “anagrammatic signature” reading “I. d. Masse” in the text of *Saint Erkenwald*, and then attempts to identify Hoccleve’s “maister Massy” as John Massey of Cotton

⁵² Cargill and Schlauch 1928, 117-23.

⁵³ Andrew 1997, 29. Andrew is sceptical towards all these hypotheses. I agree with him since they are groundless. However, they are useful to see how the discussion on authorship has developed.

⁵⁴ Greenwood 1956, 6-12. The Massey theory is the starting point for the assumption of common authorship between the Cottonian poems and *Saint Erkenwald*.

⁵⁵ Nolan and Farley-Hills 1971.

in Cheshire.⁵⁶ Then there are other contributions to the debate, such as the articles by William Vantuono and Katherine L. Adam, but the last worthy speculation to be mentioned is that by Thorlac Turville-Petre and Edward Wilson, where Turville-Petre maintains that “maister Massy” is William Massy, Receiver-general and General Attorney to John of Lancaster, while Wilson rejects the anagrams and cryptograms detected by Nolan and Peterson.⁵⁷ Reviewing the theory as a whole in the introduction to his edition of *Saint Erkenwald*, Peterson, who in the meantime endorses the position of Wilson, does not accept any hypothesis of the existence of signatures, cryptograms and anagrams, on the basis of the argumentation of Wilson. He concludes that “no hidden signatures have been demonstrated in either *Pearl* or *Saint Erkenwald*”.⁵⁸ The final contribution to this debate is an article by Erik Kooper on John Massey as the “encoded author” of *Gawain*. He stresses the importance of the number of stanzas in the poem, detecting a signature, a cryptogram, and an acrostic in the fifth stanza, and also a possible signature in *Patience*.⁵⁹

Another identification is given by Michael J. Bennett. He provides an argument on the basis that the cultural environment of the work of the *Gawain*-poet was the court of Richard II, which had strong connections with the north-west, especially Cheshire. Discussing evidence of literary interests among the aristocracy and gentry of this region, he mentions that Humphrey Newton, whose apparent familiarity with *Gawain* in the early sixteenth century was noted by Rossell Hope Robbins, had an ancestor, Richard Newton, who wrote some occasional verse at the end of the fourteenth century. Bennett quotes the relevant lines, and, while admitting that they are “crude and unpolished”, claims to discern in them “definite stylistic affinities” with *Gawain*, and goes on to assert that Richard Newton might be regarded as “a major poet of the alliterative school, or perhaps even as the anonymous *Gawain*-poet himself”.⁶⁰ This notion is firmly rejected by Derek Pearsall, who stresses, however, the value of Bennett’s study as a whole. Pearsall also judges the theories exposed above affirming that:

⁵⁶ See Peterson 1977 for a complete theory on the Masseys.

⁵⁷ See Vantuono 1975; Adam 1976; Turville-Petre and Wilson 1975 for the cryptograms and anagrams theory on Masseys.

⁵⁸ Peterson 1977, 19-23, 57-58. Even if Peterson rejects some theories, he still remains a supporter of the authorship of the *Gawain*-poet for *Erkenwald*.

⁵⁹ Kooper 1982, 158.

⁶⁰ See Robbins 1943; Bennet 1978, 67-8 for further theories on the court of Richard II.

These attributions are based on such naive and improbable assumptions concerning what constitutes evidence as to bring the study of attribution into disrepute.⁶¹

Scholars have, however, continued to make suppositions about the poet, mainly on the basis of internal evidence from the poems themselves. Speculations are oriented to two main routes: on one side the poet as a priest for his knowledge of the Bible, on the other of the poet as someone who served a noble household for his familiarity with aristocratic life.⁶² This topic, in the perspective of authorship based on internal evidence, shall be approached more in detail later, in a deeper analysis of the four poems of the Cotton Nero A.x.

⁶¹ Pearsall 1982, 68. I agree with Pearsall, however it is relevant to evidence that this is one of the approaches chosen by scholars.

⁶² Andrew 1997, 29-31. Andrew and Waldron 2007, 7-10. These theories on the life of the author, without hypotheses on his name, are more shall be considered again. They might be useful to understand if the *Erkenwald*-poet was the *Gawain*-poet too.

Chapter 2

The Poems of the Cotton Nero A.x Manuscript

2.1 The poems

In the first chapter, I have already dealt with some topics that concern the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript and the poems in it, in particular the language of the poet (and of the scribe), the alliteration, and the alliterative line. In order to continue examining other useful arguments about the common authorship of the four poems, I find necessary to provide a short synopsis, or how the text is structured, for all the compositions in the codex. In the meantime, I shall also point out some functional elements of the texts. The poems will be presented following the order of their collocation in the manuscript.⁶³ I have chosen as reference edition Andrew and Waldron's one, since it has been revised quite recently and I find it more reliable in comparison to others.

2.1.1 *Pearl*

Pearl is the first text of the collection. It is an elegy and a religious dream vision poem arranged in 1212 lines and 101 stanzas which follow a strict rhyme scheme (*ababababbcbc*) and have alliterations, although not always on stressed syllables. Each section is divided in groups of five stanzas and ends with a refrain formed by a word or a phrase. This refrain, then, is repeated at the beginning of the next group of stanzas, creating, in this way, a concatenation. The same process recurs with the last words of the poem, which concatenate with the beginning of the text, shaping a continuous chain. This formal unit is relevant to mark and summarize the main argument of each stage of the poem, and emphasizes the three settings which features the sections of the text: the garden, the Terrestrial Paradise, and the New Jerusalem.

Briefly, the synopsis: the poem starts with a praise to pearl⁶⁴ (which is also the first word of the text and is used by modern scholars as the title of the poem⁶⁵), and a few lines later we have the narrator relating of his return to a garden where, in the past, he had lost a pearl dear to him. Soon after, he fell asleep there. At this point, the man says that his spirit reached heaven and began to explore that Paradise, until he - hence forth "the Dreamer", as scholars called him - runs into the

⁶³ For more detailed information about the poems of the Cotton Nero A.x, see Anderson, 2005.

⁶⁴ In these opening lines, the poet introduces the concept of "pearl", but I think that is more appropriate to discuss about it later, because this concept recurs in all the four poems of the manuscript.

⁶⁵ Like *Pearl*, even *Cleanness* and *Patience* use the first word of the text as title.

“Pearl-Maiden”. After providing a description of her, a dialogue between the two characters begins, in which he asks if she is his pearl lost in the garden. From there, after the Maiden confirmed she is that pearl - actually his daughter who died in childhood - the two characters discuss on the Dreamer’s conception of life and of his sorrow for his loss. Therefore, the Maiden tries to make the man understand that he is wrong for his selfishness and desire to possess her as in life: now she is in heaven, in God’s grace, and for this reason her father should be glad. Then the man asks her why she has become so gracious and reached God’s blessing, becoming a bride of Christ, even if she, in her earthly life, did nothing to deserve her celestial beatitude for her untimely departure. In order to explain this, the Maiden tells him the Parable of the Vineyard, explaining that God’s justice is different from humans’. After that, it is described the condition of the saved in Heaven, and the Maiden brings the Dreamer along with her to the New Jerusalem. The vision of the city echoes the description represented in the Book of Revelation by Saint John. After the vision, the Dreamer wakes up displeased to have returned on earth.

Given the summary of the poem, we can see the structure of the text divided by sections:

I	Garden:	The Dreamer is searching for his lost pearl and falls asleep
II-IV	Terrestrial Paradise:	Exploration by the Dreamer
V-XVI	Terrestrial Paradise:	The Dreamer and the Maiden
	V-VIII	Discussion between the Dreamer and the Maiden
	IX-XII	Parable of the Vineyard; summary of the Christian doctrine on grace
	XIII-XVI	Application of the doctrine of the Dreamer; description of the state of the saved in Heaven
XVII-XIX	New Jerusalem:	Vision of the New Jerusalem
XX	Garden:	The Dreamer wakes up

A clarification: as regards *Pearl*, I used and shall continue using the term “section” to indicate that segments of text constituted by groups of five stanzas (or six for section XV), while the term “scene” for a set of a variable number of sections (from a minimum of one in the first and last scene, to a maximum of twelve for the central scene) usually determined by the setting (the garden, the Terrestrial Paradise, or the New Jerusalem). The concatenation pattern indicated earlier can be found between two sections and two scenes too.

The first scene opens in the garden, the setting where the man is awake, and the return to the garden in the final section evidences the idea that the Dreamer-narrator must keep on facing his

initial struggle. So, the garden is the outer frame. Within this frame, after the first section and before the last one, we have two scenes, both built on three sections, which balance each other: from II to IV, the exploration by the Dreamer of the Terrestrial Paradise; from XVII to XIX, the vision of the New Jerusalem. In the midst of *Pearl*, from V to XVI, there is the main and longest scene, surely the most articulated: the encounter between the Dreamer and the Pearl-Maiden in the Terrestrial Paradise. This scene can be furtherly divided into three parts, as noted in the previous table.

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, *Pearl* is a dream vision, and, for this reason, follows the conventions of this genre. The Medieval tradition of this genre has as models and foundational texts Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, or Boethius' *De consolacione philosophiae*, while the most important dream vision poem in Medieval English literature is Langland's *Piers Plowman*. The dream is the vehicle through which a divine truth is communicated and revealed. During the revelation, the protagonist, like our Dreamer, is, in a sense, in and out the actual world. In fact, the Dreamer-narrator says (61-72):

Fro spot my spyryt þer sprang in space;
My body on balke þer bod in sweuen.
My goste is gon in Godez grace,
In aventure þer meruayles meuen.
I ne wyste in þis worlde quere þat hit wace,
Bot I knew me keste þer klyfez cleuen.
Towarde a foreste I bere þe face,
Where rych rokkez wer to dyscreuen.
Þe lyzt of hem myzt no mon leuen,
Þe glemande glory þat of hem glent;
For wern neuer webbez þat wyzes weuen
Of half so dere adubbemente.

On these lines we will return later for a comparison with the other texts of the manuscript in 2.3. In the Terrestrial Paradise, the Dreamer finds the Maiden, and they dialogue together on the Christian doctrine. The dialogue between the two characters is probably the focal part of the poem, since it is here that the Dreamer learns the true doctrine and morality, taught by the Maiden, quite like Beatrice to Dante in the *Commedia*. In addition, the Dreamer gets acquainted

and aware of the identity of the Maiden: she is her daughter, the pearl he lost in the garden. This passage is collocable in the genre of debate, typical of the literature of the Middle Ages, even if the poet makes it rich of dramatic intensity, psychological insight, and human sympathy, mainly for the particular situation, since there is a father that realizes that his child has become a celestial Maiden in God's grace, Christ's bride. The Dreamer, although Christian, figures out that he is ignorant in the knowledge of the doctrine: thus, the debate allows a complete and authentic conversion of the man. After having talked with the Maiden, he reaches the true Christian values and beliefs, the true faith. However, from this knowledge derives no comfort, for his pearl shall remain in Heaven. Usually, there is a sort of dichotomy in these debates in Medieval literature: the ignorant man and the authoritative and often divine voice. But in *Pearl* the scene does not appear so simplistic: even if, sometimes, the Dreamer looks self-pitying and stubborn (particularly when he cannot understand how she could be considered a sort of queen in Heaven, although she died young⁶⁶), the reader sympathizes with him because the concepts exposed by the Maiden are not easy to understand, and for the man's grief caused by the Maiden's harshness and authority. The Dreamer, in fact, follows his emotions, as ordinary people.

Another question must be resolved. We have said, so far, that the Maiden is the dead daughter of the narrator, and it is likely she was two years old. Therefore, at the beginning of the poem, the man, when is searching for his lost pearl, is actually mourning his child. I shall report below a passage from the edition of Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron:

The text provides support for such an interpretation in several passages. In the "recognition scene" between the Dreamer and the Maiden, he terms her a *faunt* (161) - or "child" (cf. "infant") - and states that she was closer to him than an aunt or niece (233). He subsequently alludes to the fact that she *lyfed not two ȝer in our þede* (483) - or "country" (presumably in the sense of the world). During his vision of the New Jerusalem, he refers to her as *my lyttel queen* (1147), and his final blessing, made with reference to her (1207-08), is expressed in a formula used exclusively in Middle English by parents to their children. The Maiden herself states that she *watz ful ȝong and tendre of age* (412) when she died. While all this would seem to support the idea of the Dreamer as a father lamenting the death of an infant daughter, it must be acknowledged that their relationship is nowhere defined in such unequivocal terms.

⁶⁶ The answer to the Dreamer question is that the Maiden had already been baptized, and, since she did not live long enough to sin again, died as an innocent.

However, Andrew and Waldron sustain also that the poem is not necessarily autobiographical, and it would appear naïve to consider the poet and the narrator the same person, for other poets from that period, such as Chaucer or Langland, made use of fictive narrators. We cannot establish whether the poet lost his daughter or wrote the poem for another actual mourning father.⁶⁷ An opposite position is endorsed by Burrow, who, somehow, accepts that “naïve” stance that Andrew and Waldron criticized. In fact, according to Burrow, *Pearl*, like other contemporary works, reports a dialogue between a man and a divine figure, usually a woman, who actually existed. He reports the examples of the *Commedia* with Dante and Beatrice, an actual Florentine lady, loved by the poet in life; Boccaccio’s *Eclogues*, where a maiden, Olympia, appears to the author himself, who in a letter identifies with her daughter Violante, dead in childhood like the daughter of the Dreamer in *Pearl*; Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*, written in occasion of the death of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, in 1368.⁶⁸ Honestly, I find Burrow’s theory quite interesting and not so unreasonable. Nonetheless, I prefer to agree with Andrew and Waldron because there is a substantial difference from the other cited poets: of these men we have, first of all, a name and, secondly, enough biographical details or documents left by the authors themselves, such as letters. As regards the *Pearl*-poet, on the contrary, there is a lack of concrete proofs on the author’s biography, and such a theory like Burrow’s is unreliable and too much conjectural. After all, Andrew and Waldron do not state that the poem is or is not biographical or autobiographical, as most of the scholars tend to do automatically⁶⁹, but rather suggest being careful making such an assumption without evidence.

In *Pearl* there are other significant elements and themes. Nevertheless, I shall discuss them later, in comparison with the other three poems of the manuscript.

2.1.2 Cleanness

Cleanness is the second poem of the manuscript in order of appearance. It consists of 1812 alliterative long lines. Like *Pearl*, it opens with a praise of the topic of the text: *clannesse* (“cleanness”). Through the entire poem, the term *clene* and its derivatives *clannesse* and *clanly* occur many times and are used as connectors between the various parts of the text. The term

⁶⁷ Andrew and Waldron 2007, 12-16. The theory of the poet’s lost child has been taken into account for the life of his life, supposing that he was not a priest.

⁶⁸ Burrow 2001, 6. Although it is not demonstrable, this theory is acceptable for the biographical evidence of the authors of the cited literary works.

⁶⁹ Among them, for instance, there is Gollancz, who probably was one of the first scholars to follow this rushed approach (Gollancz, 1891).

clene in the Middle Ages had more connotations, unlike nowadays where its main meaning is “clean”, free from dirt, marks, or stains, so a physical condition. Of course, in the poem it means “clean”, as we modern reader know it, but also “pure”, and refers rather to a moral condition. In fact, the other title given by scholars to the poem is *Purity*, reflecting the Medieval connotation of the Middle English word. However, the title *Cleanness* is still more used because it echoes the words in the composition. I find it useful to provide a list of the semantic range of the term *clene*: morally pure, innocent, decent, proper, free from dirt, healthy, wholesome, clear, transparent, shining, splendid, elegant, excellent, complete, free from admixture, perfect, discerning, and skilful. Then, the poet, together with *clene*, *clannesse* and *clanly*, employs other synonyms and terms - for instance the already mentioned *pure*, *honest*, *fayre*, *schyre* with all their connotations - and the concepts of *cortaysyse* and of *trawþe*: *cortaysyse* because cleanness, both moral and physical, was associated to the aristocracy, with the *cort*⁷⁰ (“court”); *trawþe*, and other related words such as *trwe*, *lel*, *vntrewe*, and *false*, because it refers to the loyalty and the moral duty to God, and acceptance of one’s proper role in the world.

The poem follows a well-defined structure, by which, after an introduction where the concept of *clannesse* is explained in a more theoretical way, there are three exemplary sequences, each one containing three examples, two minor and a major, positive or negative, of cleanness:

Introduction

Praise of cleanness (1-22)

The Beatitude, Blessed are the pure in heart (23-48)

The Parable of the Wedding Feast and its application (49-192)

Introduction to the three *exempla* (193-204)

First exemplary sequence (205-544)

Minor *exemplum* (1): The Fall of Lucifer (205-34)

Minor *exemplum* (2): The Fall of Adam (235-48)

Major *exemplum*: The Flood (249-544)

Link passage (545-600)

Second exemplary sequence (601-1048)

Minor *exemplum* (1): Abraham and Sarah (601-76)

Minor *exemplum* (2): Lot and his family (677-890, 973-1000)

Major *exemplum*: The destruction of the cities: Sodom and Gomorrah (890-972, 1001-48)

⁷⁰ Term occurring many times along with *clene*, as well as the couple *cortaysyse* and *clannesse*.

Link passage (1049-1148)

Third exemplary sequence (ll. 1149-1804)

Minor *exemplum* (1): Nebuchadnezzar's seizure of the vessels, conversion, and death (1157-1332)

Major *exemplum*: Belshazzar's feast and death (1333-1650, 1709-1804)

Minor *exemplum* (2): Daniel's account of Nebuchadnezzar's conversion (1651-1708)

Conclusion (1805-12)

The main theme of the poem is cleanness, indeed. But this means that God does not tolerate uncleanness, that is *fylþe* ("filth", "impurity") and *mistrauþe* ("lack of faith"). Who is not clean cannot go in Heaven and deserves a divine punishment. To introduce this topic, the poet, after the encomium of cleanness, with reference to the sixth Beatitude (Matthew 5:8), reports the Parable of the Wedding Feast in a poetic shape, where a king organizes a banquet for his heir's marriage, inviting all his realm, all of his subjects, who should have been all well-dressed. During the feast, the king spots a filthy-dressed man, and, after having reproached him, drives the poor guest out from the banquet. That is the reading key of *Cleanness*.

The *exempla*, which are stories designed to illustrate a precept and the narration significant episodes, are taken from the Old Testament. They provide, of course, examples of cleanness or uncleanness in their various aspects. Without providing a plot of the poem, since the text presents well-known biblical tales stories, we see that the main episodes (major *exempla*) are the Flood, presented in terms of punishment for sexual uncleanness, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah for *fylþe* uncleanness, and Belshazzar's feast and death for blasphemy, *vntrauþe*. The negative examples are more numerous than the positive (Noah, Abraham, Lot, and Nebuchadnezzar's conversion), because it is through those bad examples that the reader pursues *clannesse*.

For its didactic intent, *Cleanness* has often been categorized as a literary homily.⁷¹ In fact, throughout the poem, usually as linking sections between two exemplary sequences, there are pieces of text that could be easily considered sermons. In the Medieval sermon, a Christian precept is presented and illustrated in theoretical terms, usually in relation to a scriptural text. After this theoretical piece of text, the poet inserts an *exemplum*, the demonstration completing the theory stated previously. Certainly, this genre influenced the poem, but *Cleanness* cannot be categorised as a sermon in verse. In fact, the narrations in this poem occupy the majority of the

⁷¹ See Lecklider 1997, 66-79 for the homily genre.

lines, and in proportion the sermon sections, or simply moral teachings, are fewer and shorter than the narrations. Additionally, the biblical sources are modified and elaborated by the poet, who adds empathy and details to the narrations, making the reader appreciate or despise a precise character. Even God is humanized, and such a thing does not occur in the sermon genre: initially, he destroys life on earth for his revulsion at the uncleanness, but, nonetheless, after the Flood, he regrets having taken this decision, and promises that humankind will be never erased again. In conclusion, *Cleanness* is not a mere homily, but rather an elaborated poetical work.⁷²

2.1.3 *Patience*

Patience consists of 531 alliterative long lines. It possesses more or less the same features of *Cleanness*. In fact, like the previous poem, *Patience* begins with a praise of the virtue of patience. The Middle English term *pacience* is used by the poet with two connotations: on the one hand, patience is misfortune's acceptance and submission to pain, mental and physical; on the other hand, it means waiting, holding back, and exercising moderation and self-control. At the beginning of the poem (1-60), reference is made to this virtue with the usage of different substantives and verbs: *pacience*, *suffraunce*, *suffer*, *abyde*, *þole*. In the same way, there are different terms and expressions for the feelings to control: *heuy*, *herttes*, *swelme*, *malyce*, *þro*. To explain what patience is, the poet provides a single long *exemplum* from the Old Testament: the story of the prophet Jonah, who refuses God's request of going and preaching to the Ninevites, and tries to flee with a ship. During the passage in which God gives the prophet that order and in other different passages, we notice that Jonah is described as angry:

Al he wrathed in his wyt, and wyþerly he þoʒt. (74)

He wex as wroth as þe wynde towarde oure Lorde. (410)

Jonas al joyless and janglande vpryses. (433)

With hatel anger and hot, heterly he callez. (481)

Clearly, Jonah is a negative example of patience. Wrath was considered a deadly sin, and, in particular, the sin opposed to the virtue of patience. The method is the same of *Cleanness*: bad *exempla* to which the reader has to oppose, in order to reach one particular virtue.

⁷² Andrew and Waldron 2007, 16-19.

The structure of the poem is simple, and, as said earlier, is fundamentally the same used in *Cleanness*, from which *Patience* differs only for providing just one *exemplum*:

Prologue: discussion on patience (1-60)

Exemplum: story of Jonah (61-527)

Epilogue: essential message (528-31)

In the prologue, we have the narrator declaring he has heard the Sermon of the Mount (Matthew 5:3-10), which leads to the reflection on the Beatitudes and then on the virtue of patience. This passage is formulated according to the sermon genre: like in *Cleanness*, there is a theoretical part which explains a precept, followed by a practical example from the bible. Here the story of Jonah starts: like the exempla in *Cleanness*, the scriptures are elaborated by the poet with a narration rich of details, descriptions and pathos, elements completely absent in the biblical text, the Book of Jonah, which lacks of embellishment. The poet has made the biblical tale livelier, at times comic, at times dramatic. Forward I shall discuss the sources more in-depth, comparing the four poems to each other.

The poet focuses on the relationship between God and Jonah. The story opens with their first encounter. God tells the prophet that the sins of the Ninevites are intolerable, and declares what the man must do, that is going to Nineveh and preaching to the people. Jonah disobeys angrily, refusing his role in the world and his duty to God and humankind, and flees for fear, thinking that God cannot see him. Later in the poem, after the prophet has completed, in the end, his mission in Nineveh, he rebels again against God, who, for the second time⁷³, puts pressure on Jonah with the forces of nature, but, nonetheless, demonstrating his mercy at the end of the story. God's actions are opposite to Jonah's selfish and irrational conduct. God is certainly humanized by the poet, like in *Cleanness*.⁷⁴ However, in *Cleanness* God subordinates his mercy to his justice, while in *Patience* he subordinates his justice to mercy. The results in the numerous episodes of the two poems are completely different: in *Patience*, God threatens death to humanity, but death will never come; in *Cleanness*, instead, as punishments, humankind is erased once, and five cities are completely destroyed creating the Dead Sea.⁷⁵

⁷³ The first time is when Jonah is on the ship, fleeing from God.

⁷⁴ Andrew and Waldron 2007, 19-21. God in *Patience* is the positive *exemplum*, in contrast with Jonah. Since the only human character is Jonah, God a similar role to that of Abraham or Noah in *Cleanness*.

⁷⁵ Anderson 2005, 126. I suggest that *Patience* could be a continuation of *Cleanness* for their affinities.

In conclusion, like Burrow⁷⁶, I think *Cleanness* and *Patience* are works of the same poet. As seen before, the structure is substantially identical (with the only difference that in *Patience* only one exemplar episode is presented), the main sources are the Old Testament and Matthew for both the texts, the development of the two topics, *clannesse* and *pacience*, is the same, and these two themes show two specular aspects on how the poet perceived God. Of course, like *Pearl* in regard to the discussion concerning the possibility that the poem may be (auto)biographical, we cannot take a conclusive decision for a lacking confirmation. However, my belief is that it is quite unlikely that two poems so similar in language, narrative and descriptive styles, structure, and themes might have been written by two different hands.

2.1.4 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Sir Gawain is a romance of 2530 alliterative long lines, 101 stanzas. Each stanza is built on a number of alliterative long lines which varies from twelve to thirty-seven followed by a five line “bob and wheel” (one single-stress line and four two-stress lines, rhyming *ababa*). This poem has a more articulated plot and a particular structure. The romance is divided in four large sections called “fitts”, marked by the large initial capital letters present in the manuscript. Most of the editors assume that the four fitts are structural units.

First fitt. The poem opens with a short frame which set the story in the context of a British mythical foundation by Brutus, linking the Arthurian romance with the fall of Troy. Then the tale starts. During a New Year’s feast at Camelot, a completely green giant knight enters Arthur’s hall. Holds a holly branch and an axe, he issues a festive challenge: a knight must strike him with the axe and then, in a year and a day, accept the return blow. After moments of shock, Gawain steps forward. He decapitates the knight, who promptly picks up his head and rides out of the hall, instructing Gawain to seek him at the Green Chapel.

Second fitt. The seasons pass. After All Saints’ Day, Gawain starts his journey, with the pentangle on his shield symbolising courtesy, purity and truth (the five courtly values). On Christmas Eve, he reaches a splendid white castle. Gawain is warmly welcomed by its lord and dines before attending mass, where he meets his host’s beautiful wife. After three days’ feasting, Gawain learns that the Green Chapel is close and agrees to stay until New Year.

⁷⁶ Burrow 2001, 33. Differently from Andrew, who is more cautious, Burrow affirms that it is likely that the two poems were written by the same person. I agree with him, since stylistically there is no relevant difference, and by the contents it is possible to affirm that one is the continuation of the other.

Third fitt. To pass the time, his host suggests a game: Gawain will rest while the lord of the castle goes hunting, and, in the evening, they will exchange what they have won (the “Exchange of Winnings”). The next day the lord hunts deer and Gawain dozes until his host’s wife climbs onto his bed. He courteously fends off her suggestive comments (so he tries to resist her temptation) but accepts a single kiss. Having butchered their kill, the huntsmen present it to Gawain. The knight kisses his host in return, and they spend the evening feasting. The following day, the lord pursues a boar as his wife joins Gawain. He politely rebuffs her more explicit advances, but she kisses him twice: that evening, he exchanges two kisses for the butchered beast. On the third day, as her husband hunts a fox, the lady tests Gawain to the utmost, kissing him three times. He refuses her ring, but when she offers him her girdle – which she claims has protective powers – he thinks of the Green Knight and accepts. He spends the day confessing in the chapel and that evening exchanges three kisses for a fox-fur, concealing the girdle.

Fourth fitt. On the appointed day, Gawain ties the girdle around his waist and makes his way to the chapel, refusing his guide’s pleas to abandon his quest. Approaching the sinister barrow alone, the Green Knight appears and sharpens his axe. Gawain kneels and lets him strike the blow, and the Knight swings the blade, halting when Gawain flinches. His second blow is also a feint, but the third grazes Gawain’s neck, drawing blood. As Gawain draws his sword, since the game is concluded, the Knight cheerfully identifies himself as Gawain’s host (the lord of the castle) and explains that the first two strokes represent his honesty about the kisses, the third reflects his minor fault in concealing the girdle. Despite the Knight’s reassurance, Gawain is distraught about failing to sustain his knightly code, for he has concealed the girdle. Cursing his frailty and women, he declines to return to the castle, but vows to wear the girdle as a sign of his weakness: an act of repentance from Sir Gawain for the concealment of the girdle. Before he departs, the Green Knight gives his name, Sir Bertilak of Hautdesert, and explains that the episode was engineered by Morgan le Fay. Gawain returns to Camelot, where, despite his protestations, his success is celebrated, and his fellow knights adopt the girdle as a symbol of honour, and not as a symbol of weakness, as a result of his repentance. The poem closes with a reprise of the Troy frame.

Being *Sir Gawain* a romance, it is possible to establish the type-episode structure:

1. The Christmas/beheading challenge (1): a knight (Gawain) must strike the Green Knight with the axe and then, in a year and a day, accept the return blow.
2. Separation: the seasons pass. After All Saints' Day, Gawain sets out in order to seek the Green Chapel (self-exile).
3. Adoption: Gawain reaches a splendid castle where he is warmly welcomed by its lord and meets his host's beautiful wife. It may be seen like a sort of adoption.
4. Challenge (2) and threatened betrayal (1): advances by the lady and one kiss.
5. Challenge (3) and threatened betrayal (2): advances by the lady and two kisses.
6. Challenge (4) and threatened betrayal (3): advances by the lady and three kisses, Gawain refuses her ring but accepts her girdle, concealing it to the eye of the lord.
7. Service and revenge (on behalf of King Arthur, since Gawain is one of the knights of the Round Table): Gawain, as promised, rides to the Green Chapel and lets the Knight strike his blow (actually three blows).
8. Recognition (in this case on the part of the adversary, the "enemy"): the Green Knight gives his name, Sir Bertilak of Hautdesert, and explains that the episode was engineered by Morgan le Fey (as a "test").
9. Restoration (always anticipated by the recognition): Gawain returns to Camelot, where his success is celebrated, and his fellow knights adopt the girdle as a symbol of honour after his repentance. He has undergone a process of moral rehabilitation and is accepted as a proper knight.⁷⁷

A romance is built on particular narrative constructions. These narrative patterns are shared by a culture (or more cultures), so are present in different texts from different authors. In order from the smallest to the largest we have: syntagmemes⁷⁸, motifemes⁷⁹, type-scenes, and type-episodes. The last two patterns are of our direct interest here, in the purpose of understanding the structure of *Sir Gawain*. Scenes consist of ordered or unordered sequences of a limited number of motifemic slot patterns (usually only four or five) which are filled by variants of syntagmemic patterns, often in repeated sequences of twos and threes. When a scene is a patterned, repeated configuration of events and characters, composed of obligatory and optional motifemes which may be either conditioned or free, it is a type-scene. Type-scene may occur once or more in the given narrative. The exchange of winnings between Gawain and Bertilak in the castle and the encounters between Gawain and the Lady are type-scenes. The type-scene are included in a larger emic unit: the type-episode. It is a generalized and abstract pattern of large-scale narrative

⁷⁷ Andrew and Waldron 2007, 21-23. See Anderson 2005 for more information of the structure of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

⁷⁸ Syntagmeme: a slot pattern occurring with syntagms, a formula.

⁷⁹ Motifeme: a pattern featured by specific elements that make it typical and put it in contrast with other type-patterns, so other motifemes.

units consisting of certain contrastive identificational features (nuclear and optional type-scenes, some arranged in typical linking patterns). The formulaic sequences are not all linearly fixed; there is a great deal of freedom in the syntagmatic arrangements of episodes. With this pattern, rigid segmentation is both undesirable and unlikely to yield useful results, for narrative must be analysed as a dynamic process, so the criteria for segmentation and unit definition must be flexible. Type-episodes are the largest narrative unit took into account here in the already mentioned hierarchical series of narrative constructions. Its definition is relative to the system. As an emic unit, an episode is repeatable, it demonstrates closure: an episode ends when the activity specific to it ends). Some poets have favourite scenes which they expand to almost episode-length. In our case, the challenge-episodes (Christmas' beheading game and the exchange of winnings), the threatened betrayal-episodes (the temptation scenes), and the service and revenge-episode (Gawain and the Green Knight at the Green Chapel) are surely the longest parts, on which the poet focused more. Other episodes can be used as transitions and be contracted to their minimal structure, with no more than few lines containing the nucleus (for instance, the separation-episode).⁸⁰ Although *Gawain* is a romance and shows differences in the contents of the narration and, in particular, in its structure (as just seen), later we shall observe that there are similarities between this poem and the other previous three texts.

The fact that *Gawain* belongs to the romance genre is visible from the themes too. In fact, we see an idealized chivalric background, a quest in a strange land, tests of courage, the temptation for the seduction of a beautiful lady, and the marvellous elements. However, one can notice a sort of detachment by the poet from the genre, for he questions the ideals of chivalry, even with a bit of humour at times. First of all, from the beheading game onwards, with the exception of the hunting scenes, the point of view is always that of Sir Gawain, whose perception of the environment surrounding him can be limited, but, indeed, focussed on honour, duty, and morality. It is important to point out that, during the beheading game in the first fitt, when Gawain was about to take a religious oath, the Green Knight stops him, for the covenant is based on honour, or better, on *trawþe* (402-04):

“And I schal ware alle my wyt to wynne me þeder –
 And þat I swere þe for soþe and by my seker trawep.”
 “Þat is innogh in New 3er – hit nedes no more...”

⁸⁰ See Wittig 1978, 103-178 to deepen the scene and the episode patterns.

Verbatim, *trawþe/trawep* means “(word of) honour”. In *Cleanness*⁸¹ we saw that it also receives a religious connotation. But in *Gawain* the term is used with its narrower sense, the one here proposed. This is the key word of the poem, what really determines Gawain’s decisions and actions. For *trawþe* he leaves Camelot searching for the Green Chapel and respects the oath taken with the Green Knight. Yet, for honour and a test of courage, he moves toward certain death too. Going forward in the poem, even the moral and religious virtues of chivalry are denoted with the synonyms and antonyms of *trawþe* (*trwe*, *lel(ly)*, *leuté*, *falce*, *falssyng*, *vntrawþe*). In fact, at the end of the fourth fitt, since Gawain perceived as a fault the fact that he kept secret the girdle from Bertilak, he accuses himself of *vntrawþe* (2380-83):

To acorde me with couetyse, my kynde to forsake:
Pat is larges and lewté, þat longez to knyȝtez.
Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer
Of trecherye and vntrawþe –

The main scenes on which the poem relies (the beheading game, the temptation, the exchange of winnings) serve to test Gawain’s honour. In fact, in those scenes, the knight of the court of Arthur has to take a moral choice in situations of conflicting obligations. The main example is the choice between the loyalty to his host, Bertilak, and the fulfilment of courtly love with the Lady of the castle, presented in the three episodes of challenge/threatened betrayal. In all of these moments, Gawain tries to respect a precise conduct due to the ideal of chivalry (*cheualry*), a composite code of behaviour to which knights adhered in the later Middle Ages, but its origins are the Germanic values: martial prowess, loyalty, and generosity. These old Germanic values were subsequently combined with the Christian morality, characterised by faith, charity, humility, chastity, and with all the culture of the feudal society (in particular of the aristocracy), such as music, poetry, jousting, horsemanship, and hunting. In Medieval literature, this whole system produced the romance genre as a form of entertainment for the nobility. In this literary genre, in addition, the love between sexes had been added as a sign of courtesy. Therefore, Gawain’s dilemma rises here: does he remain loyal to his host, the lord of the castle, failing in courtesy towards the Lady, wife of Bertilak? Or does he have to honour the courtly love? As we know, Gawain refuses the Lady’s advances and accepts only her kisses. This also happens because

⁸¹ See section 2.1.2.

Gawain is depicted as pure and is devoted to the pentangle, as we shall see later. However, during the last challenge/threatened betrayal episode, he receives the girdle from the woman, and does not exchange it with Bertilak, firstly because he thought it would protect him during the last beheading game with the Green Knight, and, secondly, the girdle would be a proof of betrayal, if misunderstood by Bertilak. It is also for this reason that Gawain accuses himself of *untrawþe*, especially since he becomes aware that the Green Knight was Bertilak himself and that everything (the beheading game, the exchange of winnings and the temptation) was planned by Morgan le Fay to test the honour of Arthur's court. It is evident that the poet wanted to highlight the contradictions of the ideology of knighthood.

Another central element in this poem is the pentangle on Gawain's shield. It represents the union of the religious and secular values to which Gawain dedicates himself. The poet uses fifty lines to describe the shield and the meaning of the pentangle (619-69) – and one could even notice that the number of lines employed coincides symbolically with the pentangle. It is said that the pentangle is a sign of *trawþe* and is proper to Gawain “for ay faythful in fyue and sere fyue syþez” (632). Gawain's actions and senses are pure because he founds his faith on the salvation of Christ (642-43), while his fortitude derives from the divine joys of Mary (645-47). For now, this is a sufficient introduction to the matter of the pentangle, which shall be treated further in the comparison of the four poems though. In any case, we see there is a strong religious sense in this symbol, and Gawain, as a consequence, follows a precise behaviour: it is for courtesy that he does not completely refuse the Lady, but his final choice is chastity, dictated by the Christian morality and *trawþe*.

A last topic – actually more a convention – which belongs to the romance genre is the fall of Troy linked to the foundation of Britain. In our poem, this theme appears in the frame, that is, the first stanza (1-19) and the final lines (2523-25). It is narrated that the story in the poem took place after the destruction of Troy and after Brutus had founded Britain, like Aeneas and his heir Romulus with Rome. This convention can be found in all the Medieval European literature, and was used to link a country, in our case England, with Troy so as to give that same country noble origins and, in a way, to dignify its history, as a sort of new Rome.⁸²

⁸² Davis, 1967; Andrew and Waldron 2007; Borroff 2010.

2.2 The metrical patterns in the poems

As seen in section 1.2, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Gawain* are built on alliterative long lines, while Pearl has a different meter. In this section we shall discuss the metrical patterns of the four poems, trying to find some evidence of authorship, or at least similarities, among them.

2.2.1 The meter of *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Gawain*

Now we are going to observe the alliterative verse more deeply into the poems through six metrical rules elaborated in more studies by scholars and finally fixed by Duggan.⁸³

Rule 1: the Middle English poets employed only the following combinations of alliterative patterns:

aa
aax ax
axa :
xaa aa
aaa

The minimum requirement is that the two full staves must appear in first half of the line (a-verse), and the first stave in the second half of line (b-verse) must be full. As Duggan indicates, in the three poems over 90% of lines alliterate according one of these patterns:

Þe tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wroʒt	<i>Gawain</i>	3	aa/ax
Þe coge of þe colde water, and þenne þe cry ryses	<i>Patience</i>	152	aax/ax
And steken þe ʒates ston-harde wyth stalworth barrez	<i>Cleanness</i>	884	axa/ax
The grete soun of Sodamas synkkez in myn erez	<i>Cleanness</i>	689	xaa/ax
Fro riche Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swype	<i>Gawain</i>	8	aaa/ax
He glydes in by þe giles purʒ glaymande glette	<i>Patience</i>	269	aa/ax
Proly þrublande in þronge þrowen ful þykke	<i>Cleanness</i>	504	aaa/aa

In early studies, some exceptions to this rule appeared. However, they are only apparent, because the poet often used elision alliteration:

⁸³ Duggan 1997. In his studies and editions, Duggan observed that the six rules are recurring, and that is why he elaborated them formally. I employ Duggan's rules since they are the latest and the most precise.

/ x / x / x x x x x / x / x			
Nym þe way to Nynyue with-ouen oþer speche	<i>Patience</i>	66	axa/aa
x x x x / x x / x / x x / x			
Withinne an oure of þe niyzt an entre þay hade	<i>Cleanness</i>	1779	aa/ax

Elision alliteration is quite common and does not distinguish our poet from the others. More relevant and distinctive is the tendency to write verses with usually unstressed words from closed classes (prepositions, conjunctions, some verbs, auxiliaries, pronouns, monosyllabic adverbs), which are given metrical stress for being the only word carrying alliteration. This feature has been counted thirty-six times in the three poems:

x / x x / x / / x x / x			
zet hym is þe hyze kyng harder in heuen	<i>Cleanness</i>	50	aax/aa
/ x x x x / x x / x x x / x			
Hit watz not for a halyday honestly arayed	<i>Cleanness</i>	134	aa/ax
x / x x x / x x / / x			
þa3 I be not now he þat 3e of speken	<i>Gawain</i>	1242	aa/xx
x / / x x / x x / x / x			
And now nar 3e not fer fro þat note place	<i>Gawain</i>	2092	aax/ax

Rule 2: alliteration always falls on a stressed syllable. An ictus (a metrically stressed syllable) coincides with normal prose phrasal stress. The only variant of this rule is *Piers Plowman*: when the alliterative staves are well established in the first verse, a mute stave may appear in the initial or medial dip of a b-verse.

Rule 3: a hierarchy of word classes determines which words may appear in ictus. Words from open classes (nouns, adjectives, most verbs forms, adverbs with two or more syllables, pronouns ending in *-self*) take precedence over words from closed classes. Alliteration falls on the latter only with syntactic inversion or in the absence of a word from the open class, as seen in rule 1.⁸⁴ Studies have demonstrated that 97.9% of the lines in *Patience* and 97.95% of the lines in *Cleanness* are regular from a metrical point of view. On the contrary, *Gawain* shows a great variety of alliterative patterns: depending on the study, there is a range of 89-92% of lines

⁸⁴ Duggan 1997, 224-227.

metrically regular.⁸⁵ It may indicate that the poet's metrical practice changed or that the textual quality of *Gawain* is slightly corrupt. Anyway, we cannot affirm if the poet – whether he was the same for the four texts – moved from the regularity, as in *Cleanness* and *Patience*, to the variation of patterns in the same text, as in *Gawain*. Yet, an analysis of *Piers Plowman*, *The Siege of Jerusalem*, *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, and *The Wars of Alexander* suggests that it is likely that the text of *Gawain* was corrupted by the copyist: the other mentioned alliterative poems have more witnesses, and for this reason it is possible to distinguish the scribe's metrical *usus scribendi* from the author's. In fact, the lections conflicting with the alliterative rule are scribal.⁸⁶

Rule 4: the alliterative line is made up of two distinct half-lines, the verses, divided by a caesura which usually corresponds to a phrasal boundary. Manuscript evidence supports this notion: the a-verse is syllabically and semantically heavier than the b-verse, which usually serves as transitional, reiterative, or space-holding part of the line. The tendency for the verse to coincide with a phrasal unit indicates that alliterative poets seldom make use of enjambment. The central caesura or line ending usually occur at the major syntactic juncture in the line, and, similarly, caesura unlikely divides an attributive adjective and its noun head. Some exceptional examples appear in *Patience*, *Cleanness*, and *Gawain*:

a) The caesura appears at a minor syntactic juncture:

Care-ful am I, kest out fro þy cler yȝen	<i>Patience</i>	314
So hatȝ anger onhit his hert, he calleȝ	<i>Patience</i>	411
When ho watz gon, Sir Gawayn gerez hym sone	<i>Gawain</i>	1872

b) The caesura almost never separates a preposition from its head noun(s):

Þenne watz no tom þer bytwene his tale and her dede	<i>Patience</i>	135
---	-----------------	-----

c) The caesura separates an uncharacteristically stressed and alliterated auxiliary verb from an infinitive or past participle:

⁸⁵ These percentages have been calculated by Oakden 1930, and Sapora 1977. In particular, Oakden first found these values, and Sapora confirmed them later.

⁸⁶ A different view on *Gawain*'s variation of alliterative pattern is provided in Lawton 1993.

Þat so woryt as 3e wolde wynne hidere	<i>Gawain</i>	1537
As domezday schulde haf ben di3t on þe morn	<i>Gawain</i>	1884
Thenne þe kny3t con calle fui hy3e	<i>Gawain</i>	2212 ⁸⁷

d) The caesura separates an attributive adjective from its noun head:

Þe gome gly3t on þe grene graciouse leues	<i>Patience</i>	453
Syþen he is chosen to be chef chyldryn fader	<i>Cleanness</i>	684
And Mary, þat is myldest moder so dere	<i>Gawain</i>	754
Syn we haf fonged þat fyne fader of nurture	<i>Gawain</i>	919
And sayde he watz þe welcomest wy3 e of þe worlde	<i>Gawain</i>	938
As hit is breued in þe best boke of romaunce	<i>Gawain</i>	2521

The oddest violation for placement of the caesura occurs in *Cleanness* 1312, where the poet must have confused the name *Nabugodenezar* with “Nabugo of Nozar”, an idea credited by the scribe who steadily wrote the name as *Nabugo de Nozar*:

Neuer 3et nas Nabugo de Nozar er þenne

Here, I report a statement of Duggan, who maintains that the violation of metrical pattern depends on the scribe’s copy:

The rules governing a-verse rhythms and the caesura are normative rather than categorical, though both are formidably regular in their application. The rules governing alliteration and the distribution of stressed and unstressed syllables, on the other hand, are categorical. That is, the evidence shows that apparent violations of rules 1-3 and 5 invariably represent scribal error. Not every metrically regular b-verse is authorial but every unmetrical b-verse is scribal.

Rule 5: the b-verse consists of two lifts and a number from one to three dips. The verse requires a minimum of four syllables and allows a maximum of eight. One of the dips preceding either lift must be strong. Both initial and medial dips may not be strong. The line terminal dip is

⁸⁷ Deficiency in alliteration and syllabic structure in these lines may indicate that they were not written by the poet.

optional and is always weak. In addition, the requirement that either the initial or medial dip must be strong is waived in b-verses in which a disyllabic adjective stressed on the first syllable immediately precedes a noun stressed on its first syllable.

Rule 6: the a-verse consists of two or three lifts and from one to four dips. There are rarely more than six or seven syllables in an a-verse dip, and the most common rhythmical patterns involve three or fewer syllables in each dip. None to five unstressed syllables may occur before the first lift and from none to seven immediately follow it. None to three syllables may fall after the final stressed syllable. Though any two dips may have three syllables, the third clip in such lines tends to be light, and when any one clip contains four or more syllables, the other two dips tend to have from two to zero syllables. Differently from b-verses, a-verses are more flexible.⁸⁸

2.2.2 The meter of *Pearl*

For a long time, *Pearl* was thought to be written in alliterative long lines for two reasons: the first one is the density of alliterating syllables for verse; the second one is that once such rules as those indicated in the previous section were not recognized and, therefore, present. As a consequence, the meter of *Pearl* appeared identical, or at least of the same kind, of the other three poems' meter. Though the presence of alliterating syllables, the poem does not fulfil all the requirements of the six metrical rules of the alliterative verse. Actually, *Pearl* is written in a traditional form of the late Middle English iambic tetrameter.⁸⁹ Since the discovery of the real meter of the poem, scholars have perceived *Pearl* as composed in half-lines of unpredictable rhythmic shape, with the full line varying between seven and fourteen syllables, and alternating iambic, trochaic, anapaestic, pyrrhic, and spondaic feet. As a matter of fact, it is evident that *Pearl* is not an alliterative long line, since alliterative poems do not present alternating rhythms, iambic or anapaestic, in b-verse. Conversely, in this poem over 90% of the last two feet in any line are regular iambs. Right at the beginning, in the first line, it is possible to notice that alliteration and metrical stress do not coincide, feature that should appear in alliterative long lines:

/ x / x / x /
Perle, plesaunte to prynces paye

⁸⁸ Duggan 1997, 227-232.

⁸⁹ See Stephens 1988 for the differences in style and syntax between the *Pearl*-poet and Chaucer.

The characteristic iambic form can be clearly seen in those verses with unambiguous syllable count or stress assignment:

/ x / x / x /	
Blomez blayke and blwe and rede	27
/ x / x / x /	
Flor and fryte may not be fede	29
x / x / x / x /	
Per hit doun drof in moldez dunne	30
x / x / x / x /	
Of goud vche goude is ay bygonne	33

It has been noted that many lines present a reduced or an increased number of syllables not corresponding to the regular iambic tetrameter used in the poem. Nonetheless, a comparison of *Pearl* with the other three poems of the manuscript shows that there are scribal forms (scribal spelling and scribal choices as regards synonyms or doublet forms), which are different from those of the poet, as seen earlier. These innovative forms can be precisely found where the number of syllables in a line does not correspond to the iambic tetrameter. The copyist tended to write dissyllabic *oper*, *syþen*, *wheþer*, *neuer*, *euer*, and *ouer*, where the meter shows that the poet wrote monosyllabic *or*, *syn*, *where*, *n'er*, *ert*, and *o're*. This phenomenon occurs in all the four poems of the codex.

Furthermore, the rules governing the scribe's use of written final *-e* differed from the those of the poet. The copyist put final *-e* not to be sounded. Scribal <-e> tends to appear under the following conditions:

1. after monosyllabic stems ending in a consonant cluster (*golde* < OE *gold*; *grounde* < OE *grund*; *breste* < OE *bréost*; *corne* < OE *corn*; *honde* < OE *hond*; *towarde* < OE *tóweard*; *ofte* < OE *oft*; *foreste* < OF *forest*). The spelling *fonte* at 1327 for the past participle of *findan* shows that the *e* is motivated by the combination of vowel plus consonant cluster rather than a survival of inflectional *-en* since the *e* would have had to be reduced to zero for final *-d* to have become *-t*. This is only a strong tendency and not universal in the manuscript. Counter instances are *rert* 591, *bycalt* 1163, *flonc* 1165.

2. following a single consonant to indicate the length of the tonic vowel (*oute* < OE *út*; *sede* < OE *séd*).⁹⁰

The scribe wrote final *-e* to convey phonetic features of the preceding syllable rather than to express grammatical function or to designate syllabic schwa. Though the poet himself usually did not sound this kind of *-e* in mid or final position, he occasionally used historically motivated syllabic *-e* when the meter required it. It has been demonstrated that in *Pearl* the poet did not tend to sound final *-e* in rhymes. Within the line, evidence for the loss of *e* appears in monosyllabic weak or plural adjectives when the meter requires the silencing of an historical *-e*:

x / x / x / x /		
Pat wont watz whyle <i>deuoyde</i> my wrange	15	inf.
x / x / x / x /		
For <i>care</i> ful colde þat to me caʒt	50	etym. < OE <i>cearu</i>
x / x / x / x /		
And wony with hyt in <i>schyr</i> wod-schawez	284	pl. adj.
x / x / x / x /		
Now he þat stod þe <i>long</i> day stable	597	wk. adj.

As we are observing by the meter, weak and plural adjectives inflection were not sounded neither by the poet nor by the scribe.

Nevertheless, even lines metrically regular for the use of etymological *-e* can be detected: *stille* < OE *stille*, 20; *faste* < OE *fæste* (stressed in 54, unstressed in 150 because monosyllabic); *tonge* < OE *tunge*, 100; *gemme* < OF, 118, 289; *herte* < OE *heorte*, 128, 176; *tenþe* < OE *ten* + ordinal *-þa*, 136; *Bytwene* < OE *betwéonan*, 140; *mote* < OF, 142; *nwe* < OE *néowe*, 155; *fayre* < OE *faeger*, 169, 177; *sute* < OF *su(i)te*, 203; *kynde* < OE *gecynde*, 276. A smaller set of lines is metrically regular because of a historically motivated inflectional *-e*: *fyrce* (pl. adj.), 54; *fyrre* (wk. adj.), 148; *wynne* (pl. adj.), 154; *aske* (inf.), 316; *ozte* (pret. impersonal), 341; *or soþe* (petrified dative), 292.

Caesura is found in *Pearl* too, and it occurs more frequently than other famous poems in four-stress lines, like Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess* or *Cursor Mundi*. This division in half-lines

⁹⁰ For other examples, see Gordon 1953, xlvi

has led some scholars to believe that the poem was built on alliterative line, even for the reason that the syntactic juncture fell after the second stress:

So rounde, so reken in vche araye	5
x / x / x x / x x /	
To þenke hir color so clad in clot	22
x / x / x x / x /	
Þat spot of spysez mot nedez sprede	25
x / x / x x / x /	

However, caesura appears in 5-10% in *Pearl's* lines. It cannot be considered an alliterative poem. In fact, other verses show evidently that the full line is the fundamental metrical unit. That is, the syntactic integrity of the colon in Middle English alliterative verse is frequently violated in *Pearl*. Caesura appears in many lines where metrical and syntactic units do not coincide:

x / x / x / x /	
Queresoever I jugged gemmez gaye	7
x / x / x / x /	
I sette hyr sengeley in synglure	8
x / x / x / x /	
Þat fryth þer Fortwne forth me ferez	98

Other lines demonstrate that caesura can appear after the syntactic juncture too:

x / x / x / x /	
The adubbemente of þo downez dere	85
x / x / x / x /	
Pow wost wel when þy perle con schede	411
x / x / x / x /	
Hys lef is. I am holy Hysse	418
x / x / x / x /	
Ne knawe 3e of þis day no date?	516
x / x / x / x / x	
And fyrrre, þat non me may reprene	544

x / x / x / x /
 For hit is wemlez, | clene, and clere 737

Some verses, instead, show two syntactic junctures, but the meter is not based on them and works regularly:

x / x / x / x /
 Þay wente | into þe vyne | and wroʒte 525
 x / x / x / x /
 On oure | byfore þe sonne | go doun 530
 / x / x / x /
 “Þus schal I” | quoþ Kryste, | “hit skyfte” 569

Because of the poet’s usage of final *-e* in contexts which the scribe was not accustomed to for dialects’ differences, apparent clashing stress occurs in several lines because a historically justified final *-e* is omitted in the manuscript. In the following instances, the historically justified inflectional or etymological *-e* that makes each verse metrical has been added in square brackets:

Pat dotz bot þrych my hert[e] þrange 17
 Where ryh[e] rokkez wer to dyscreuen 68
 Of wod and water and wlonk[e] playnez 122
 I hope no tong[e] moʒt endure 225
 Pat hatz me broʒt þys blys[se] ner 286⁹¹

The fit between the independent systems of grammar and meter make believe that the poet used doublet forms. The case would be weakened if it were possible to find significant numbers of lines with clashing stress for which no historically motivated *-e* available, but there are none.⁹²

2.3 The *Gawain*-poet

In this chapter, the most relevant formal and theme-based aspects of the poems in the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript have been obtained. Now, what has derived from this study so far is being

⁹¹ Other examples can be found in lines 381, 486, 564, 586, 678, 683, 825, 999, 1036, 1046.

⁹² Duggan 1997, 232-237.

compared in order to try to understand whether the four texts were written by the same author or not. As maintained from the beginning of this work, a definitive answer to the question of common authorship of the four poems is impossible since only a witness is known. However, I have cause to assume that they may be composed by one hand. By the way, these pieces of information shall be useful to analyse another poem, *Saint Erkenwald*, and then to compare it with the Cotton Nero codex's poems. Contrarily to the issue we are facing in this chapter, the matter of *Erkenwald*'s authorship can be philologically solved, as it will be established next. Nevertheless, returning to the purpose of this section, the common authorship of the four poems attributed to the *Gawain*-poet shall be addressed in philological and linguistical terms, and from the topical perspective, so in literal terms. Moreover, some arguments not examined until now shall be observed. The combination of all the information and evidence obtained should provide a reasonable theory of authorship.

2.3.1 Stylistic and formal comparison

Since the discovery of the Cotton Nero codex, the majority of scholars has been of the opinion that the poems were composed by one author, usually called “*Gawain*-poet” or “*Pearl*-poet”, from the two most relevant texts in the collection. In 1.4, discussing the hypothesis on authorship attribution, I have quoted Dorothy Everett. She asserted that probably it was one author who wrote the four poems, on the basis that it seems unlikely that there were two or more men from the same locality and period, and with so similar qualities, also considering that the poems have several links with each other.⁹³ Such is the most wide-spread opinion of scholars⁹⁴, not just for the reason that they were copied in one manuscript, but rather for the fact that they were copied as a collection of alliterative poems (of course, *Pearl* does not follow the same meter of the other four texts, but uses alliteration), and not as individual pieces, all in the same scribal dialect. Moreover, the theory of common authorship is supported by correspondences of vocabulary and stylistic features, the use of verse forms and narrative framing, and the tendency for a balanced and symmetric narrative.⁹⁵ Again, even if it is not possible to confirm the common authorship, the majority of scholars, and I too, agree with Williams:

⁹³ Everett 1955, 68.

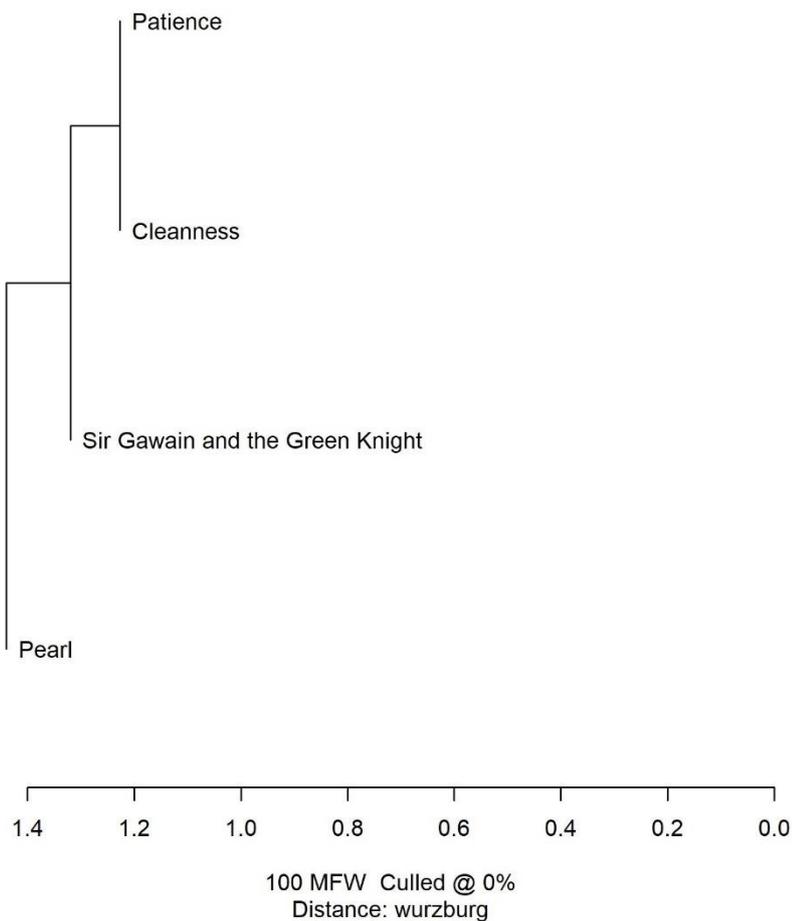
⁹⁴ Anderson 1969, 4; Spearing 1970, 37; Pearsall 1977, 170. Against this view, see Clark 1949; 1951; Bloomfield 1960; Lawton 1982b.

⁹⁵ Andrew and Waldron 2007, 2; Andrew 1997, 23-26.

There is no proof that these poems were written by one man, but the feeling that they were dies hard among most readers of them, including myself.⁹⁶

In order to study the authorship, I shall start from a quantitative analysis of the poems with Stylo, a R package which provides implementations of various established analyses in the field of computational stylistics, including non-traditional authorship attribution, genre recognition, style development.⁹⁷ By the scrutiny of the items in the texts with the software, it should be possible to provide a first hypothesis on the relation between the poems.

Documents Cluster Analysis



⁹⁶ Williams 1970b, 143. For the lack of other witnesses, it is impossible to confirm the common authorship, even if it is quite likely.

⁹⁷ Eder, Rybicki and Kestemont 2006.

In order to do this analysis, I have picked up the vocabulary of the whole corpus, excluding those items that are of common usage not only in these texts, but also in the tradition, that is pronouns, possessive adjectives, conjunctions, and prepositions. In fact, they show a too high frequency through the texts, thus affecting the result of the analysis. With Stylo R, the results indicate a direct connection between *Cleanness* and *Patience*. However, the chart shows a distance between these two texts and *Pearl*, while *Sir Gawain* assumes a linking role for the two branches. At first glance it would seem that there is not a real affinity between all the four poems, given that in the chart the texts appear in different levels and in different branches, with the exception of *Cleanness* and *Patience*. Despite this, through a more detailed observation of certain features, it will be possible to understand that these texts may be considered closer, indeed.

In the section in which *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was discussed (2.1.4), it was mentioned the narrative system of the romance genre, mainly indicating scenes and episodes, and briefly explaining the patterns. The narrative structures of the four poems in comparison will be treated soon. Yet, the concept of formula is of our interest now. This pattern was typically used in romances, but its use was extended to other genres. In fact, as it has been observed before, the Cotton Nero's poems are not romances, with the exception of *Gawain*. However, formulas occur in *Pearl*, *Cleanness* and *Patience* too. In Middle Ages, texts were characterized by a repetitive style, by redundancy and conventionality. Style is a functional element of a text, not a superficial element. The text, by means of style, is a unified product of the author's intentions and the audience's expectation. Style explicates other levels of the text, and is chosen by the poet, providing his perception. A formula is a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical condition to express a given essential idea. It is a mental template in the mind of a poet, a pattern making device. Tradition, so a cultural heritage, is used to produce originality in new poems. It must be considered that in Middle Ages poems were orally performed, and formulas, for their redundancy and stereotyped style, allowed the message contained in the text to be preserved. Each performance could manipulate the text, introducing some modifications to the original, but, at the same time, the text would be included in a sort of traditional path through these traditional patterns. Therefore, manipulation guaranteed the traditional patterns but added originality. The repetition of periphrasis, of formulas, made a text more predictive, enabling the communication of a message to the audience. The grammatical or syntactical structure of a formulaic system is always fairly constant, that means that there are fixed parts. These systems consist of empty rhythmical syntactical models ready to be filled with meanings. They are, in a

sense, boxes to fill with different meanings according to the poet and his message. The lexical element is only a manifestation of the formal pattern. The formula system operates with the substitution in the framework of grammar: a subject can be changed, while a verb can be preserved, or vice versa. The formulas are the phrases, the clauses, and sentences of the specialized poetic grammar, the tagmemic grammar.⁹⁸ To explain what the tagmemic grammar is, I report Susan Wittig's definition:

Tagmemic analysis is a linguistic theory which attempts to take into account the hierarchically patterned features of language structure. [...] Language is built by a series of grammatical hierarchies of emic units, units which have particular and distinctive significance within a given system. [...] On any given structural level the distribution of emic units takes place in a pattern of slots.⁹⁹

Given the theoretical introduction on the formulaic pattern, it is possible to look into the poems. Even if scholars have become increasingly aware that parallels in vocabulary and phrasing are unreliable indicators of common authorship for the formulaic nature of these texts, according to someone there are phrases and terms used rarely in Middle English poetry which, on the contrary, are frequently employed in the Cotton Nero's poems, and, as a result, they can be considered a clue of the *Gawain*-poet's compositional style. Particular attention has been focused on the periphrases: these constructions consist of a noun or pronoun immediately preceding a relative clause, like the following example from *Gawain* (53):

And he þe comlokest kyng þat þe court haldes

This periphrasis is referred to King Arthur, so it can be found only in *Gawain*. But what links the four poems is the wide use of periphrases of this kind in order to qualify God (and Christ too). Such constructions have been considered a peculiarity of the poet in matter of style. They appear in all the four poems of the manuscript, and that is why they are deemed as one of the most relevant evidence for common authorship. Now, I shall provide various examples from the texts, proceeding in order of appearance in the manuscript:

⁹⁸ Lord 1960, 35-36. He theorized this studying Homer and the Yugoslavian bards.

⁹⁹ Wittig 1978, 37-38. In detail, the emic units are, in order, syntagmemes, motifemes, type-scenes, and type-episodes, as already exposed in 2.1.4.

And loue my Lorde and al His lawez	<i>Pearl</i>	285-6
Pat hatz me brozt þys blys ner.		
My Lorde þe Lamb louez ay such chere,	<i>Pearl</i>	407-8
Pat is þe grounde of alle my blysse.		
Bot He on rode þat bloody dyed	<i>Pearl</i>	705
Quat kyn þyng may be þat Lambe	<i>Pearl</i>	771-2
Pat þe wolde wedde vnto Hys vyf?		
Pat glorious Gyltlez þat mon con quelle	<i>Pearl</i>	799
For synne He set Hymself in vayn,	<i>Pearl</i>	811-2
Pat neuer hade non Hymself to wolde		
For wonder wroth is þe Wy3 þat wrozt alle þinges	<i>Cleanness</i>	5
He is so clene in His courte, þe Kyng þat al weldez	<i>Cleanness</i>	17
Pat þat ilk proper Prynce þat paradys weldez	<i>Cleanness</i>	195
Pat þe Wy3e þat al wrozt ful wroþly bygynnez	<i>Cleanness</i>	280
Forþy war þe now, wy3e þat worschyp desyres	<i>Cleanness</i>	545-6
In His comlych courte þat Kyng is of blysse		
Of þe sy3te of þe Souerayn þat syttez so hy3e	<i>Cleanness</i>	552
Hov schulde I huyde me fro Hym þat hatz His hate kynned	<i>Cleanness</i>	915
Bot honoured he not Hym þat in heuen wonies	<i>Cleanness</i>	1340
þur3þe somones of Himselpe þat syttes so hy3e	<i>Cleanness</i>	1498
Bot Hym þat alle goudes giues	<i>Cleanness</i>	1528
Goddes gost is þe geuen þat gyes alle þynges,	<i>Cleanness</i>	1627-8
And þou vnhyles vch hidde þat Heuen-Kyng myntes.		
As He þat hy3e is in heuen, His aungeles þat weldes	<i>Cleanness</i>	1664
Hit watz non oþer þen He þat hade al in honed	<i>Cleanness</i>	1704
þa3 þe Fader þat hym formed were fale of his hele	<i>Patience</i>	92-3
Oure Syre syttes,” he says, “on sege so hy3e		
He wende wel þat þat Wy3 þat al þe world planted	<i>Patience</i>	111
Hit may not be þat He is blynde þat bigged vche y3e	<i>Patience</i>	124
For þe Welder of wyt þat wot alle þynges	<i>Patience</i>	129
Bot He þat rules þe rak may rwe on þose oþer?	<i>Patience</i>	176
Pat Wy3e I worchyp, iwysse, þat wrozt alle þynges	<i>Patience</i>	206
Bot he watz sokored by þat Syre þat syttes so hi3e	<i>Patience</i>	261
þe rurd schal ryse to Hym þat rawþe schal haue	<i>Patience</i>	396
I wot His my3t is so much, þa3 He be myssepayed,	<i>Patience</i>	399-400

pat in His mylde amesyng He mercy may fynde		
“Nay, as help me,” quop þe habel, “he þat on hyze syttes”	<i>Gawain</i>	256
To se þe seruyse of þat Syre þat on þat self niȝt	<i>Gawain</i>	751-2
Of a burde watz borne oure baret to quelle.		

As we see, this kind of paraphrasis is used in all the four poems, especially in *Cleanness* and *Patience*, where God is directly involved in the narration. Nevertheless, *Pearl* and *Gawain* show the usage of this pattern too, even if less frequently, since the role of God (or Christ) is different from the other two poems. However, this pattern is extended to the figure of Mary, above all in *Gawain*, since the knight of the court of Arthur is devoted to the Virgin, therefore playing a nearly equal role to God:

And Mary, þat is mildest moder so dere	<i>Gawain</i>	754
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Even in *Pearl* there are periphrases about Mary:

We leuen on Marye þat grace of grewe,	<i>Pearl</i>	425-6
Pat ber a barne of vyrgyn flour.		

It has been noted that only two formulas referring to God and operating with this kind of construction can be found outside the Cotton Nero A.x codex in the whole body of Middle English poetry:

þe habel þat on hyze syttes
 þe Prince þat Paradis weldiþ

These examples, though with different graphemes and not identical for the nature of the formulaic pattern, can be easily detected in the four poems: among those already cited, the first one in *Cleanness* 552, 1498, *Patience* 93, 261, *Gawain* 256, while the second one in *Cleanness* 195, even though constructions with the verb *welde* are common as it is possible to observe above. However, similar periphrases on God also appear without the construction with the relative pronoun:

Another remarkable feature of the poet is the vocabulary, either for the term “man” and its synonyms or associable words, either for God (and Christ). Usually, poets used ordinary synonyms for “God” (“lord”, “father”, “prince”, “king”, *Dryzt*). Otherwise, in the Cotton Nero’s poems, one finds the common terms indeed, but also the traditional synonyms for “man”: *burne* (which is the only exception, since diffusely used in the tradition), *gome*, *hathel*, *lede*, *schalk*, *segge*, *tolk*, *tulk*, *wyze* (which is the most used):

For wonder wroth is þe Wy3 þat wro3t alle þinges	<i>Cleanness</i>	5
and 3et wrathed not þe Wy3; ne þe wrech sa3tled	<i>Cleanness</i>	230
He wende wel þat þat Wy3 þat al þe world planted	<i>Patience</i>	111
þat Wy3e I worchyp, iwysse, þat wro3t alle þynges	<i>Patience</i>	206
“Nay, as help me,” quop þe hapel, “he þat on hy3e syttes”	<i>Gawain</i>	256

In order to establish if this usage of synonyms of “man” to refer to God is a distinctive trait of the *Gawain*-poet, I have checked how these terms are employed in other texts of the tradition. I have chosen as sample: *Piers Plowman*, the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, *The Siege of Jerusalem*, *The Wars of Alexander*, and *The Gest Hystoriale of the Destruction of Troy*. From these texts I have noticed that such words never refer to God or Christ, and, even more striking, their use is much less frequent through the whole texts than in the poems of the Cottonian manuscript, where they are quite common. In particular, *tulk* never appears, probably for its Old Norse origin (ON *túlk-r*), with the only exception of *The Gest Hystoriale of the Destruction of Troy*: it is a free rendering of the prose *Historia Troiana* by Guido de Columna, written in 1287. The translation must have been made in the North or North-West Midlands in the second half of the fourteenth century, more or less like the poems of the Cotton Nero A.x., and this may suggest the use of an Old Norse vocabulary. Yet, despite the presence of the term *tulk* and the use of a similar dialect, it is unlikely that it was written by the *Gawain*-poet for the lack of the other features seen so far. In any case, for the supposed originality proved by scholars, who compared the poems of the Cotton Nero manuscript with others of the tradition, the *Gawain*-poet is assumed to have been a creator rather than a borrower, because, again, his periphrases appear to be his own inventions, and the vocabulary of rare use in other poems.

Another common feature of the three alliterative verse poems is the application of *h*-alliterations, for which, in a line, the words beginning in *h* alliterate with each other:

He se3 no3t bot hymself how semly he were	<i>Cleanness</i>	209
Hurled into helle-hole as þe hyue swarmez	<i>Cleanness</i>	223
Hurled into vch hous, hent þat þer dowelled	<i>Cleanness</i>	376
Halez hy3e vpon hy3t to herken tyþyngez	<i>Cleanness</i>	458
Herttes to hy3e heþe, harez to gorstez	<i>Cleanness</i>	535
Hernez and hauekez to þe hy3e rochez	<i>Cleanness</i>	537
Her3ed out of vche hyrne to hent þat falles	<i>Patience</i>	178
Hef and hale vpon hy3t to helpen hymselfen	<i>Patience</i>	219
If I wolde help My hondewerk, haf þou no wonder	<i>Patience</i>	496
Wheþer hade he no helme ne hawbergh nauþer	<i>Gawain</i>	203
“Nay, as help me,” quop þe hapel, “he þat on hy3e syttes	<i>Gawain</i>	256
þat his hert and his honde schulde hardi be boþe	<i>Gawain</i>	371
Halled out at þe hal dor, his hed in his hande	<i>Gawain</i>	458
Bot þen hy3es heruest, and hardenes hym sone	<i>Gawain</i>	521
Ouer at þe Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk	<i>Gawain</i>	700
Hize hillez on vche a halue, and holtwodez vnder	<i>Gawain</i>	742-3
Of hore okez ful hoge a hundreth togeder		

This pattern does not only belong to the *Gawain*-poet, but usually it is more common to find *h* alliterating with vowels, and the fact that the poet uses it many times, in particular in *Cleanness* and *Gawain* can be considered an indicator for common authorship.¹⁰⁰

Though its meter differs and does not need to fulfil the rules of the alliterative verse, *Pearl* shows this kind of alliteration too, even if more rarely:

To hed hade ho non other werle	<i>Pearl</i>	209
I hete thee arn heterly hated here	<i>Pearl</i>	402

A last argument worth talking about is the structure of the texts. Actually, they differ one from the other in terms of structure, basically for their genres (and meter too, as regards *Pearl*). Only

¹⁰⁰ Benson 1965, 398-404. Actually, this pattern is present in other poems to (among the *Saint Erkenwald*), but its frequency is rather impressive in the *Gawain*-poems.

Cleanness and *Patience* are built in the same manner.¹⁰¹ Nonetheless, all of them have a common feature: the frame. In fact, *Pearl* begins with the Dreamer searching for his pearl in a garden, then falling asleep. After the dream vision, the Dreamer wakes up again in the garden. Moreover, at the very beginning of the poem there is a praise to pearl, while at the end a sort of prayer. *Cleanness* opens with a praise to *clannesse*, explaining what it is and what it requires, and concludes with a further explanation of the concept. *Patience* works similarly: again, the poem starts with a praise to *pacience*, saying that it is one of the Beatitudes (among them there is also *clannesse*), and ends with the concept of patience as well. The conclusions of *Cleanness* and *Patience* serve provide a final moral after the various practical examples from the Old Testament. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, there is the conventional frame of the destruction of Troy and, in this poem, the foundation of Britain by Brutus. As we can note, all the four poems are circular, as in their prologues and their epilogues are linked together: at the end there is always the reprise of the contents (themes and settings) the reader finds at the beginning. In addition, all the four poems are closed by a prayer to God or Christ which is shaped according to the meter of the entire poem, therefore, in my opinion, it cannot be a supplemental part added by the scribe. At the very end of the poems, it is written “Amen” (twice in *Pearl*), but actually it is not so relevant, since, contrarily to the prayers, they could be added by the scribe.¹⁰²

To conclude this stylistic and formal comparison of the poems, some relevant features and patterns for common authorship have been evidenced, in particular for the three alliterative poems. Even the pieces of evidence found in *Pearl* are significant, even though not sufficient, since the form of this poem is so distinct from the other three. In my opinion, the variation of style and meter is a mark of the poet’s talent and cleverness. But, despite this, it is necessary to obtain other proofs with literary arguments.

2.3.2 The literary evidence

As seen before, the formal and stylistic tests have provided evidence for the common authorship of *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Though these tests have been profitable, they are not sufficient to establish if the poems were written by one hand. Once again, a real breakthrough for the question of common authorship would be made only if other witnesses of these texts were discovered. Despite this lack, it is possible to compare the poems

¹⁰¹ See 2.1 and all of its sub-sections.

¹⁰² Andrew and Waldron 2007, 12-26. The scribe might have added the “Amen” since all the poems ends with a prayer. Nonetheless, it can be an authorial feature.

from a thematic and literary point of view. The results of this comparison plus those of the formal and stylistic tests should enable us to understand whether the four poems were written by the so-called *Gawain*-poet. Together with themes and topics, space will be also given to the sources of the four poems, which shall make us comprehend the culture of the author.

The first notable feature is the confrontation in all the four poems between one or more human protagonists and a superhuman character. Starting with *Pearl*, we have the Dreamer and the Maiden: through the entire poem, frame excluded, the dialogue between the two characters occurs. At first, there is a long debate on Christian doctrine on grace, which the Maiden teaches to the Dreamer. It is in this occasion that the sorrow of the Dreamer comes out, because he becomes aware that the Maiden is the pearl he lost (probably his daughter). But through the teachings of the Maiden he also understands that he has not to despair, since now she is a celestial being in God's grace. In the last part of the dialogue, the Maiden shows him the New Jerusalem, and he comprehends everything on Christianity. In *Cleanness* we have various examples of cleanness or uncleanness: men who confronts God (Adam, the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, Belshazzar), and men faithful to God (Noah, Abraham, Lot, Nebuchadnezzar). Who has been clean in life is spared by God; who has been unclean is annihilated. *Patience* has Jonah as the protagonist, and God, like in *Cleanness*, is the superhuman being. In this case, even if Jonah wants to get flee and shows a wrathful temper, God is merciful towards him. The last of the four texts, *Gawain*, presents, again, a man, Sir Gawain, but the superhuman element is rather different this time: if in the other three poems there was God or another celestial creature linked to him, like the Maiden, here the Green Knight is rather "magic" related. But if the Green Knight is the main "antagonist" (even though he is not actually evil or against Gawain), all the menaces affecting the Round Table's knight are planned by Morgan, an enchantress. Therefore, the magical element remains. Whatever the type of the superhuman figure is, divine or magical, celestial or evil, wrathful or merciful, scholars have noticed that the treatment of unequal struggles of human beings against such figures reflects wry humour and a non-heroic view of humankind. What emerges from these confrontations is the sympathy from the poet – and then from the readers – for the moral and ethical challenges with which men are tested. Usually, all these confrontations are also featured by debates: the most evident, because of its functionality for the development of the text, is that between the Dreamer and the Maiden, as indicated above. But in the other poems debates occur too: in *Cleanness* between God and Abraham, in *Patience* between God and Jonah, and in *Sir Gawain* between the Green Knight, but also with the Lady,

and Gawain.¹⁰³ In all the four cases, through dialogues or actions, the superhuman character tests the morality of men.

More generally, penitential themes and motifs have been identified in all four poems. Three of them specifically emphasize the futility of disobeying God or resisting the divine will (*Pearl* 336-60; *Cleanness* 677-780; *Patience* 49-58, 109-28). In *Gawain* does not disobey God, but through the poem there are examples of the penitential motif. For instance, almost at the end of the third fitt, after the gift of the girdle from the Lady during the third encounter, Gawain passes the rest of the day confessing, until Bertilak returns. And more striking is the moment when he becomes aware that the Green Knight/Bertilak knew everything, about the encounters with his wife, and about the girdle too. From line 2370 until the end of the poem, Gawain constantly blames himself for *untrawþe*, which means that he did not fulfil God's will. The concept of *trawþe* is central in *Gawain*, but is present in the other three poems too, particularly in *Cleanness* (63, 236, 667, 723, 1490, 1703, 1736), where it constitutes a fundamental value to be morally clean.

Another focal topic is the pentangle. As said in 2.1.4, it represents the five wounds of Christ and the five joys of Mary, but primarily Gawain's ethic and *trawþe*. The fifth pentad consists of moral virtues particularly associated with knighthood. Two of these, *clannesse* and *cortaysye*, are important in the other three poems too. As has been noted above, consideration of the treatment of the term *clannesse* in *Cleanness* reveals a broad range of meaning, extending from physical cleanness to moral purity and spiritual perfection. *Cortaysye* has a similar range of reference, from the graces of courtly behaviour to theological grace (especially in *Pearl*). It is impressive how *cortaysye* is juxtaposed with *clannesse* in the passage on the pentangle. This implicates that the perfect knight must be free from the sinful love, while not rejecting any aspect of *cortaysye* that can be reconciled with Christian morality. In the temptation scenes, the lady insists on discussing and acting out the conventional tenets of romantic love; for fear of discourtesy, Gawain does not refuse. The lady's idea of the obligations of courtesy deeply differs from Gawain's, but he can avoid her efforts of temptation by pretending not to understand her or by affirming his own unworthiness. However, he cannot refuse her directly. Explaining the link with *Cleanness* is unnecessary, for it is evident for the term *clannesse*, which has been widely discussed through the entire chapter. However, it is noteworthy the fact that cleanness is one of the Beatitudes listed in *Patience* (32). Instead, *Pearl*, as mentioned previously, presents a

¹⁰³ See Davenport 1978, 195-207 for more information on men's condition in the poems.

praise to Mary (432-444), who is defined “cortaysse quen” (433) and “quen of cortaysye” (444). The meaning of the term is linked to the theological grace rather than the courtly behaviour, but the two meanings are often associated to each other in the romance genre. We shall observe that the concept of grace is very relevant.

Continuing with *Pearl*, scholars have noticed that the already cited line 64 in 2.1.1 shows a peculiarity:

In aventure þer meruayles meuen

It constitutes a typical application of words normally associated with romance and the quest for human love and personal fulfilment to a quest for spiritual truth. Even Paradise is described in the same way of the romances’ gardens where the lovers encounter with each other. Moreover, in that passage of *Pearl* it is said that the Dreamer ascends by God’s grace, that same grace linkable to *cortaysye* (both courtly love and theological grace). Passages from *Cleanness* (1057-9) and *Patience* (35-9) have been associated to *Pearl* for the same love language characteristic of the romances.¹⁰⁴ However, it is in *Gawain* that the love language reaches the peak: in the three seduction scenes, though the presence of the moral theme of *trawþe*, the poet mainly focuses on reporting conversations, the kind of conversations between men and women which in his day were known as “dalyaunce” or “luf-talkyng” (927, 1012, 1529). The joy of such talk is that it can mean anything or nothing, so far as serious sexual intentions are concerned.¹⁰⁵

A topic not yet faced is the concept of “pearl”. It functions with a wide range of metaphorical suggestions and connotations, yielding more significance, and representing different things at different stages of the poem. In the opening stanzas, it is the material gem. Used metaphorically by the narrator for his dead child, it suggests her preciousness to him. In contrast to the earth of the garden, it suggests everlastingness; through its whiteness and perfect roundness, it comes to stand for innocence and perfection, the immortal soul, the Pearl of Price (725-39; Matt. 13:45-6), the Kingdom of Heaven (this identification is reinforced in the Dreamer’s vision of the New Jerusalem with its twelve gates of pearl (1037-8), as the Book of Revelation (21: 21) describes), and the company of the saved. Through these various connotations it also participates in several related metaphorical systems. As a valued object, it comes to serve as a symbol for value in

¹⁰⁴ Andrew and Waldron 2007, 5-25. It is likely that the poet knew the courtly life and its manners.

¹⁰⁵ See Burrow 2001, 48-9; Anderson 2005 for deepen the topic.

general, and to facilitate the use of the term “jeweller”, through which the poet explores the contrasts between worldly and heavenly attitudes to value (241-300). Its connection with princes and courts in the opening and closing lines helps to unite the *cortaysye* which is an attribute of noble manners and conduct with the *cortaysye*, or grace, of the court of heaven.¹⁰⁶ Because pearls are white and seamlessly spherical, they can be understood to symbolize moral purity (*cleanness*) or innocence: either the baptismal innocence which the Maiden had no occasion to lose, or the recovered purity of those who may “receive the kingdom of God as a child” (722-4, Luke 18: 17) after a lifetime. The image of the pearl is applied specifically to the latter state in a passage in *Cleanness* (1113-32), where the white stone stands for the condition which adults can achieve through the polishing and washing processes of penance. In *Cleanness* (1065-68), cleanness, as Christ’s purity, is compared to the pearl. Even in *Gawain* (2364-5) there is a reference to the pearl, where it is affirmed that pearls are more precious than peas, as well as Gawain is greater than all knights. In *Pearl*, the white gem encloses the same values of *Gawain*’s pentangle, first among them cleanness and courtesy (with both its senses). In addition, both *Pearl* and *Gawain* characterize their main symbols as endless: the pentangle is “the endeles knot” (630), and pearls are “endelez rounde” (738), both symbols representing kinds of limitless perfection.¹⁰⁷

After this analysis of the topics, it has come to surface the poet’s interest for morality, with special attention to three central themes: *trawpe*, *clannesse*, and *cortaysye*. These concepts appear more or less in the three longest poems, *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Little has been said about *Patience*, but although these themes barely appear in this poem, in my opinion (which is the same of contemporary scholarship) this text is a sort of continuation of *Cleanness*, since their contents are almost equivalent and developed in the same way (with the exception that one exposes the concept of cleanness and the other of patience), and their structure and compositional style are identical. In addition, the formal analysis proved its affinity with the other three poems of the manuscript. Moreover, it has been evidenced the idea of the author about the state of human beings towards God and the Christian doctrine, but also in the Medieval society of the fourteenth century, featured by the courtly life and knighthood with all their contradictions. In conclusion, the literary evidence, obtained here through the analysis of the themes and of the most relevant concepts, plus the stylistic and formal evidence can indicate a theory for common authorship of the Cottonian manuscript. In my opinion, the

¹⁰⁶ Andrew and Waldron 2007, 5-25. It is striking the fact that Heaven is described in the same way of the courts. Here *cortaysye* cannot refer only to the divine grace.

¹⁰⁷ Burrow 2001, 14-15, 52.

differences of style not yet clarified are due to the requirements the genre of each poem demands, rather to the composition by more hands. However, certain issues will remain unresolved without further witnesses.

2.3.3 The sources

Further evidence of common authorship can be found in the sources of the poems. The texts suggest a good deal about the poet's reading. His profound and extensive familiarity with the Bible is evident in *Pearl*, *Cleanness* and *Patience* since the scriptures are continuously cited. All the three texts have in common the reworking of texts from the Bible: in fact, the poems are not simple versifications of the source, which in its stories, usually from the Old Testament, appears narratively poor and concise, but they are enriched by the poetic language and by details in the narrations. They are not theological treatises. Concerning *Pearl*, the Parable of the Vineyard is taken from Matthew, while the description of the New Jerusalem (sections XVII-XIX) is taken by the Book of Revelation of Saint John. *Cleanness* presents stories all from the Old Testament, the majority of them from the Book of Genesis. The only exception is the last group of exempla, which are taken from the Book of Daniel. Like the Parable of the Vineyard in *Pearl*, the Parable of the Wedding Feast in *Cleanness* as well is from Matthew. As regards *Patience*, the story of Jonah, as for all the stories in *Cleanness*, the main source is the Old Testament, the Book of Jonah. In addition, common opinion is that the poet knew the alliterative Latin poem *Naufragium Jonae prophetae* by Marbod of Rennes. Both in *Cleanness* and *Patience*, the passages on the Beatitudes are from the Sermon of the Mount by Matthew (5:3-10). From the three religious poems it is also clear that the poet was familiar with the dominant traditions of scriptural interpretation and the most significant doctrinal issues, though he does not emerge as someone with a particular interest in exegesis.

There is no doubt that the poet knew the iconic French romance of his period, the *Roman de la Rose*, whose title is directly cited in *Cleanness* (1057-8), and echoes of which occur throughout his work, for instance when in *Pearl*, *Cleanness* and *Patience* the love language typical of the romance genre is used. His allusion, in the context of a discussion of the morality of Christian conduct in *Cleanness* (1057-64), to a secular and worldly passage from Jean de Meun's part of the *Roman*, indicates a remarkable willingness to treat source material in an independent way. Another passage in *Cleanness*, the description of the Dead Sea, has been taken to indicate that the poet had read Mandeville's *Travels* (line 1025).

The account in *Pearl* of the meeting between the Dreamer and the Maiden in the setting of the Earthly Paradise appears to reflect the influence of Dante's *Divina Commedia*. This apparent indebtedness does not necessarily indicate that the poet had acquired a reading knowledge of Italian. Though information on the presence of manuscripts of the *Divina Commedia* in England during the late fourteenth century is uncertain, it would seem by no means impossible that a member of the expatriate Italian community in London could have owned such a manuscript. Some manuscripts of the *Divina Commedia* incorporated the commentary of Jacopo della Lana, which, though originally written in Italian, had been translated into Latin. It would, therefore, seem at least possible that the poet's apparent knowledge of Dante was derived from a manuscript containing this translation, perhaps owned by an Italian living in London.¹⁰⁸

Sir Gawain reflects not only a wide-ranging knowledge of French Arthurian romance, but also a creative and critical view of the works and conventions of this tradition, as early observed. Nonetheless, its main source is considered to be *The Livre of Caradoc*, which presents a very similar narration, despite the protagonist: the young knight Caradoc takes up a beheading challenge presented by a stranger in Arthur's hall, beheads him, and presents himself for the return blow one year later, again at Arthur's court. The stranger, who is Caradoc's enchanter father, lets him off with no more than a blow from the flat of his sword. It is the first part of the continuation of the unfinished *Perceval* by Chrétien de Troyes. There are other romances presenting the beheading game: the French prose *Perlesvaus*, whose protagonist is Lancelot; *La Mule sans Frein* (or *La Damoisele à la Mule*) by Paien de Maisières, which shows for the first time Gawain in the beheading challenge; *Diu Crône*, a High German poem by Heinrich von dem Türlin, proposes the same tale of Paien; *Hunbaut*, another French romance, differs from the others for the fact that the return blow never takes place. The ultimate source, however, could be *Fled Bricrend* (*Bricriu's Feast*), an Irish tale in which the beheading game is a test of courage and honour.¹⁰⁹

2.3.4 Hypotheses on the life of the author

In conclusion of this chapter, I am providing the most important theories on the poet's life. Anyway, this section is not so relevant to comprehend this author and his works, but it is fair to point out what scholarship has elaborated, since part of the discussion on common authorship of

¹⁰⁸ Brewer 1997, 243-255.

¹⁰⁹ Davis 1967, xvi-xvii; Burrow 2001, 43. The fact that the story of Sir Gawain derives from the Celtic tradition makes it more likely.

the Cotton Nero's poems has developed towards this direction. Nevertheless, I find more significant the pieces of evidence studied up to now.

Generally, scholars have made suppositions about the poet mainly on the basis of internal evidence from the poems themselves. By dialect evidence, the common assumption is that he was a man who lived in North-West Midlands¹¹⁰, or at least this is the region where he grew up, since he could have moved in other parts of England, like London.¹¹¹ In fact, Michael J. Bennett demonstrated that the West Midlands, even if an area with a distinctive identity, had a relatively low population during this period, and a conspicuous lack of great houses. For this reason, professional men from the West Midlands migrated to London for work, often in the service of aristocrats originally from the same region. In particular, it seems that there were connections of royalty with this part of the country, especially those of Richard II, whose personal guards were Cheshire archers. Therefore, it has seemed reasonable to take into account the possibility that the poet could have been in the service of an aristocrat working in London for the royal court.¹¹² Linking to Bennett's theory, Bowers has conjectured that the poet might have worked directly in the court of Richard II, and his disappearance might be due to the obliteration of the Ricardian culture by Henry IV, who deposed Richard II.¹¹³

By comparison with Chaucer in particular, the poet does not normally make extensive use of self-presentation as a fictional device.¹¹⁴ The exception to this norm is *Pearl*, where he represents himself as a father grieving for the death of a young daughter, even though, as Andrew and Waldron noticed, the father mourning the daughter could be only a narrative device. Nonetheless, the implications of this for conjectures regarding the poet's life are significant: it can be taken to indicate that he was male and to suggest that he was not a priest, since priests were not permitted to marry. The latter suggestion derives some support from a brief passage at the end of the poem (1208- 10), where the narrator includes himself among those receiving communion from their priest. Though devices of self-presentation are less remarkable in the other three poems, they are still potentially significant. In the opening section of *Patience* (1-60), the poet offers his reflections on a biblical passage which he heard read at mass, and represents himself as someone with experience of working in the service of a lord and, in this context, retells a familiar story

¹¹⁰ Actually in Staffordshire, as seen in 1.3.

¹¹¹ Gordon 1953. This theory is almost accepted nowadays.

¹¹² Bennet 1983.

¹¹³ Bowers 2001. This theory is linked to the supposed Ricardian culture, to which the *Gawain*-poet is believed to have belonged. Even if quite interesting, it is not demonstrable.

¹¹⁴ Spearing 1997. On the contrary, Chaucer made use of self-representation and autobiographical references.

from the Old Testament. Since the poet describes himself as a hearer rather than the celebrant of mass, this might reinforce the idea that he was not a priest. In *Cleanness*, the poet's attitude is that of a teacher, not necessarily a priest, with an extensive knowledge of the Bible and a profound concern for moral issues. In *Sir Gawain*, he adopts the role of a minstrel reading his poem, for the entertainment of an audience. It is, of course, important to acknowledge that in all four poems the persona of the narrator reflects the requirements and conventions of the relevant genre. Despite this, it might at least be said that none of the narrative personae adopted by the poet would seem inappropriate to a clerk of minor orders working for an aristocratic family. This impression has risen observing the poet's knowledge and experience, his culture, included in his poems. Scholars have regularly observed that the poet appears both to have undertaken a clerical education and to have been familiar with the life of an aristocratic household. The clerical education is visible because he operates with biblical stories, doctrinal matters, and more general moral issues with confidence. His treatment of biblical material in certain passages as the description of the New Jerusalem in *Pearl*, the tale of the Flood in *Cleanness*, and the story of Jonah in *Patience* is considered a proof.

The knowledge and understanding of aristocratic life are, similarly, communicated with an ease which seems to reflect the kind of genuine familiarity which would have been available only to an insider. Though the court and courtly life are used metaphorically to talk about Heaven and the heavenly life in the three religious poems, the poet's familiarity with aristocratic life is evident in *Sir Gawain* above all. This poem contains many passages which describe the life and activities of an aristocratic household with great particularity. Numerous are the examples: the courtly conversations between Gawain and the Lady, the detailed accounts of the conduct and management of hunting, and the precise and highly particularized descriptions of armours, architectures, and sumptuous domestic fittings. It seems reasonable to suppose that this familiarity with aristocratic life reflects either the poet's upbringing or his professional experience.¹¹⁵ A passage in *Patience* (101) appears to reveal considerable familiarity with the technical aspects of working a ship, which might be taken to suggest that he had some experience of sea travel. More specifically, the occurrence in the poems of several allusions to legal concepts led scholars to conjecture that the poet might have had legal training.¹¹⁶ Other speculations regard

¹¹⁵ Andrew and Waldron 2007, 9-11. As noticed above, I suppose that the poet knew well the courtly life.

¹¹⁶ Savage 1956, 20-21. Even if it was true, it would be quite irrelevant, at least for the comprehension of the poems and of their author.

the poet's presentation of himself as a "jeweller" in *Pearl*, which might indicate that he worked with jewels and precious objects, possibly as a treasurer.¹¹⁷

In conclusion, I quote Ad Putter, who summarizes what has been evidenced in this section:

He was almost certainly a cleric from the North-West Midlands, probably a relatively unimportant cleric; perhaps in the service of a nobleman; and, arguably, his patron belonged to the circle of prominent Cheshire courtiers at the royal household in London.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Bowers 2001, 107. Like the supposed autobiographical reference to the death of the daughter, it cannot be proved, but being a self-representation it is not to exclude at all.

¹¹⁸ Putter 1996, 37.

Chapter 3

Saint Erkenwald

3.1 The matter of *Saint Erkenwald*

In 1.4, in the section about the possible attributions of the authorship of the poems in the Cotton Nero A.x, it has been said that one of the most attractive theories concerned Hugh or John Massey (or Masey), involving various signatures, cryptograms, and acrostics. It has been assumed that the name “Masse” in the manuscript of *Saint Erkenwald* would be linked with the inscription “Hugo de” in the Cotton Nero manuscript (folio 91^r), leading to Hugo de Masse. This had been the original starting point to study the common authorship of *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* together with *Saint Erkenwald*. This discussion dates back to the late nineteenth century, when scholars attributed named or anonymous authorship to many alliterative poems. This process, however, proved to be unreliable for the formulaic nature of the alliterative verse development. As observed earlier, for the authorship of the poems of the Cotton Nero A.x many names have been theorised by scholars, but none can be proved definitely. Even if the issue of the authorship of alliterative poems has been abandoned by the majority of contemporary scholarship for the formulaic pattern, the attribution of *Saint Erkenwald* to the hypothetical *Gawain*-poet still outlives. It is mainly based on dialect evidence, besides the theory on the name Hugo de Masse, which, actually, was discredited by the end of the 1970s. The poem survives in a unique manuscript from the late fifteenth century, and was written to celebrate the patron saint of London, Erkenwald. As a consequence, it has been labelled as a London poem, which is a considerable difference between the Cottonian poems and *Erkenwald*. However, it has two things in common with the poems of the Cotton codex: its probable date of composition, late fourteenth century, and a broadly similar dialect, as mentioned above. Nowadays, the theory of common authorship of *Erkenwald* and the Cottonian poems is mostly no longer assumed, even if there still are scholars, mainly the editors of the poem, who believe in it.¹¹⁹ Since the debate has not been closed and there are supporters for the theory of common authorship for the five poems, I think that the case must be examined conclusively. I shall proceed with the same approach employed for the analysis of the four Cotton Nero’s poems in the first two chapters,

¹¹⁹ Andrew 1997, 27-28. Andrew is among the sceptical scholars. My opinion is the same, but I think it is necessary to prove the validity of this position, since many scholars tend to evaluate the authorship impressionistically.

and then I shall compare the five poems. In this way, adequate results should be achieved. What I expect is a different authorship between the four Cottonian poems and *Saint Erkenwald*. However, though the five poems should not belong to the same author, on the basis of a theological debate of the late fourteenth and of the early fifteenth century, I want to check if there are connections between the Cottonian poems and *Erkenwald*. I have chosen as reference edition that by Peterson¹²⁰, since it is the most recent and the other main edition was made by Gollancz, now too old.¹²¹

3.2 The manuscript

Saint Erkenwald was copied in the British Library Ms. Harley 2250. It consists of two originally separated manuscripts bound together. The fact that they are two manuscripts is demonstrated by the foliation and by the paper. The manuscript as a whole now has two foliations. The first one, in Arabic numbers in dark brown ink, begins with what was for a certain period the first leaf of the manuscript. Later, the leaf was detached, and inserted between the folios 44 and 45 of the second foliation. Now, it is folio 44a, folio 44a^r. The second foliation, in Arabic numbers too, but in pencil, has the opening leaf of the manuscript numbered as folio 1, though it was folio 2 in the first one. The two foliations appear side by side. It is also important to notice that the folio 44a of the second foliation (the first folio of the first foliation) is not the first folio of the manuscript as the scribe produced it. In fact, the beginning sentence of this leaf was already begun in a previous lost folio. For this reason, the first foliation is not the original, and was made after some leaves had been lost. In addition, five hundred lines are missing between the end of the text on old folio 1^r and the beginning of old 2^r; probably there were two or three leaves before the first foliation was applied. The first foliation ends with old folio 88, as it is written at the top of the verso of this leaf. Folios 1-87 are written by the same hand, and a different hand begins on folio 88, while the earlier appears no more. All these features demonstrate that folios 88-108 constitute a separate work from that in folios 1-87. The early *Harley Catalogue* of 1759 describes the manuscript as it now appears, with one hundred eleven folia. However, the inscription on the verso of folio 87 describing the manuscript as one eighty-eight folia is rather modern. It is likely, for this reason, that the last twenty-four leaves were added to the manuscript during the late seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries, before the *Harley Catalogue* was written. Finally,

¹²⁰ Peterson 1977.

¹²¹ Gollancz 1922. Even if an old edition, it shall be mentioned in the development of the discussion.

although the hand of these last leaves is of the late fifteenth century (the period of the rest of the volume), there is no reason to suppose that a missing section of the manuscript was restored to it more than two centuries after its production. From here on out, references to the manuscript are to folios 1-87 only.

The manuscript, as we are now considering it, is a paper manuscript of the fourth quarter of the fifteenth century. The date, 1477, can be fixed precisely, for a colophon on folio 64v reports it. There is no reason to suppose that the colophon was a later addition. *Erkenwald* was copied at the same time as the *Speculum Christiani*, by the same scribe. Nowadays, it is impossible to reconstruct the original collation of the manuscript because the entire codex was rebound in the nineteenth century.

The contents of the manuscript have been described in the *Harley Catalogue*, where parts of works are identified as separate items, and in part in the *Register of Middle English Religious and Didactic Verse*. It is now possible to identify more fully much of the material and to give references to printed versions. Items 12 (*Erkenwald*), 25, and 27, and part of item 1 have been printed from this manuscript. The items of the manuscript are 1-38, while the others are included in the portion of the present manuscript book which was subsequently added. Concerning items 1-38, the texts are written in Middle English or in Latin. From folio 1^r to folio 47^v, there are Middle English poems on the life of Christ (item 1). After this long section on Christ, the rest of the manuscript (up to folio 87) consists of lives of the saints (among them *Erkenwald*, folios 72^v-75^v), poems of religious contents, and treatises. *Saint Erkenwald* is the only poem in alliterative verse.

The manuscript was written by a single scribe, with the exception of minor insertions in empty spaces (as items 22 and 23) and item 31. In the *Harley Catalogue* is stated that the *Life of Saint Martin* (item 2) is by another hand and that *Erkenwald* is written by the same hand which wrote the legend of Saint Martin. This statement is quite strange because the hand that wrote *Erkenwald* is the main hand visible through the whole manuscript. In fact, variations in the appearance of the hand are the result of changes in the pen and during the work of the copyist. It also seems that the manuscript is a home-made work. The lack of decoration and foliation, the use of placeholding instead of collating catchwords, and the minimal ruling of boundaries for the writing, combined with vacillation over the format, the regular practice of scratching over errors rather than erasing or expunctuating them, the use of a scrap instead of a full piece of paper for one leaf (folio 49), and the highly miscellaneous nature of the contents are all features that may

indicate a book made for use, not display, by someone not concerned for a professional reputation as a scribe. On the other side, the hand is clear and easily read, and the scribe was good at catching his scribal errors and correcting them.

Of the history and origins of the manuscript little is known. On folio 1^r appears the name Ravens, followed by the numeral 3. The same name appears accompanied by the numeral 3 on the flyleaf of British Library Ms. Harley 2327 and, without the numeral, on the flyleaf of British Library Ms. Harley 3277. If the three appearances of the name refer to one person, then the date of the inscription can be considered not earlier than the third or the fourth quarter of the sixteenth century. Two allusions by the poet of Harley 3277 are probably to Elizabeth I and to Edward de Vere (1550-1604), seventeenth Earl of Oxford and patron of literature. Moreover, the scribe of Harley 2327 dates his work 1576. Other names in the margin of Harley 2250 probably refer to Cheshire families and places, and there was a family named Raven in possession of Elworth Hall near Sandbach, Cheshire, from the time of Richard II to the end of the seventeenth century. However, the connection between the Raven family and the “Ravens” of the three manuscripts cannot be conclusively established. One relevant inscription is in folio 75^v, and seems to be a legal notice: “Nouerint vniuersi per presentes nos Eesebyt bothe of dunnam in the comytye of Chester”. From this notice, the ownership of the manuscript results to have been of the Booth family of Lancashire and Cheshire, living in Dunham Massey. Another inscription refers to Sir Thomas Bowker (probably 1490-1558), a chantry-priest in Eccles. It has been discovered that Bowker worked for the Booth family, and, for this reason, it is likely that the priest received the manuscript from Booths. At the top of folio 8^r there is the inscription: “Syr Thomas boker hos thys boke”. Another small band is written at the top of folio 71^r: “Syr Thomas boker mine emys.” Knowing that Thomas Bowker owned the manuscript about 1530, there is the possibility that he may have obtained it from somewhere in the region of a triangle formed by Chester, Stockport, and Eccles. Bowker apparently had connections with all three places. But this would be in the 1520s and 1530s, and does not allow us to understand the origins of the manuscript. The most discussed of the names inscribed in the margins of the manuscript is that of Thomas Masse. This name is found in the bottom centre of folio 13^f, enclosed in a circle, and written in a late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century hand with a brown ink more or less of the shade used for the text on the leaf. The name appears upside down in the lower left margin of folio 13^f as “Thomas masse esquier,” written with black ink in a band that appears to be of the seventeenth century. The same hand has also written the same inscription above and to the left of the colophon that ends the

extract from the *Speculum Christiani* on folio 64^v and “alexander” on folio 87^v. It is from this appearance in the British Library Ms. Harley 2250 that all the question of *Erkenwald* and Cottonian poems’ authorship has begun. We have already discussed the theories of the Masseys, so I am not dwelling on the topic.¹²²

3.3 The poem

Saint Erkenwald is a 351 alliterative-lines poem. The legend in the poem is unknown to the other sources of the saint. Here the structure of the poem:

Historical introduction;	lines 1-31
Reconstruction of the St. Paul and discovery of the tomb;	lines 32-103
Erkenwald returns in London and prays for the unknown corpse;	lines 104-176
Revelation of the pagan and the miracle.	lines 177-309

After a historical contextualization, when London was called “new Troy” and the pagan temples were converted in Christian churches, the poem relates an episode happened during the period in which Erkenwald was bishop of London. The central story of this composition is that of a righteous heathen, a judge during is earthly life, whose soul is trapped in limbo. The reason is the fact that he was not baptized since a pagan, but, despite his creed, he operated virtuously. As a matter of facts, he is in limbo: he was too fair for Hell, but, being a pagan, could not reach Heaven. His body is discovered during the excavations of the foundations of St. Paul's Cathedral in London on the site of a former pagan temple, where his tomb is uncovered. Examined the tomb, no one can understand who the man is. Moreover, his body is still intact and undecomposed. Known the news, the bishop of London, Erkenwald, moves to the cathedral, and, once there, prays God so as to comprehend who such a glorious man was in life. It is here that the dead body wakes up, by the Holy Ghost, and relates his story. Touched by the state of the heathen, Erkenwald cries, and with his tears baptizes the man, by God’s mercy.

¹²² In order to find more information on the manuscript, see Peterson 1977, 1-11; Gollancz 1922, v-viii. In addition, for the complete contents of the codex, see http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley_MS_2250

3.4 The context of composition of *Saint Erkenwald*

It is quite difficult to establish the moment in which *Saint Erkenwald* was composed, similarly for its manuscript and, more in general, for most of the Medieval poems. The year 1386 has been fixed as a possible date, but by no concrete evidence. In 1885, Friedrich Knigge first suggested 1386, for it was the year in which Robert Braybrooke, Bishop of London, decreed that the days of the Conversion and Commemoration of Saint Paul, and of the Deposition (April 30) and Translation (November 14) of Saint Erkenwald were feast-days. Gollancz relied mostly on the supposed “occasional” nature of the poem, saying that it was in honour of Saint Erkenwald that the poem had been composed. In addition, the “poet’s obvious intention” is to associate himself with the cult of Saint Erkenwald at Saint Paul’s Cathedral, assuming that, for this reason, the date of composition of the poem was 1386. Savage, in his edition of the poem, also worked from Knigge’s suggestion, and while he qualified his remarks rather more than did Gollancz, his conclusion was nearly the same. In fact, he affirmed that the poem could have been written even two or three years before, but not earlier, the episcopal letter which established the feasts. However, for the fact that the bishop complained of a lack of veneration for the days of the saint, for Savage seems more probable that the poem was not written before 1386. Gollancz’s assumption, in particular, seems to me impressionistic and groundless. But Savage’s theory has no evidence too. Even if *Saint Erkenwald* was an occasional poem, and the occasion was connected with the saint, it is not reasonable to suppose, as Savage does, that Bishop Braybrooke’s decree of the feasts was imposed because “the tide of popular devotion was running at the full”.¹²³ On the contrary, it is likely that there was an opposite situation. The bishop’s complaint in his *monitio* over the carelessness into which the feasts of the two saints had fallen may be taken either as evidence that the cult of Erkenwald was at a low point, or as a tactful response to a public clamour for more official recognition of the cult. As Peterson suggests, an example of literature inspired by the negligence rather than the active veneration of a saint occurs in British Library Additional Ms. 35298. This is one of ten surviving manuscripts of the *Gilte Legend*, the 1438 English translation of the Latin *Legenda Aurea*. This manuscript contains several saints’ lives found in none of the other manuscripts of the English translation (or of the *Legenda Aurea*), including a life of Saint Erkenwald. Attached to the life, which is translated from the version of the Latin *vita* which ultimately found its way into the *Nova*

¹²³ Gollancz 1922; Savage 1926. Their theories on dating the poem are outdated, but they still remain the starting point for the discussion.

Legenda Anglie, are a number of stories concerning the shrine to Erkenwald in Saint Paul's and the veneration of the saint. Of these, five relate horrible things that happened to people who did not observe the saint's feast days. The last of the five, for example, tells of a craftsman working on Erkenwald's tomb who, on the saint's feast-day, shut the door to the tomb so that he could get on with his work undisturbed. This impious man was disturbed by the saint, however, who rose out of the tomb and with his "staffe alle tobete hym". It seems likely that the author was admonishing for a lack of participation to the feasts.

Without taking in consideration the year 1386, the language of the poem may be useful in dating it. However, the manuscript, dated 1477, is probably a later work than the poem, and the Alliterative Revival of which the poem is an example has decayed by the middle of the fifteenth century. Scribal influence on grammatical forms is hard to calculate, especially in an unrhymed work like *Erkenwald*. In addition, trying to date the composition of the poem on the basis of the morphology of the words would be risky and misleading. Nevertheless, the words themselves may be helpful. The vocabulary of the poem is likely to be resistant, although not immune to scribal alteration. If approximately 1386 were the date of composition of *Erkenwald* (the date accepted by the *Middle English Dictionary*), the poem would provide the first record of the use in English of more than twelve words. Such evidence is hardly conclusive, but it may suggest that 1386 is an early date of composition on which to fix. In the end no date of any precision can be given with certainty, though there are suggestions that the poem was composed close to the end of the century or even after it. It would seem more reasonable that the poem was probably written between 1380 and 1420, and later in that period rather than earlier. In addition, more recent studies have hypothesized that the poem would have been written in the political context of the years 1388-92.¹²⁴ In those years, there was a theological discussion on the salvation of the pagans and of the infidels, of those who died without receiving baptism. To this subject, Medieval philosophers and theologians have given great consideration and have tried to resolve with specific explanations. Concerning this, Thomas Aquinas introduces the concept of "implicit faith", that is, the faith in divine providence by which man can reach salvation. The discussion also involves Britain: in particular, William of Ockham sees, in the legend of the salvation of Trajan by Saint Gregory¹²⁵, the intervention of the power of God, thus bringing to the concept of predestination. The topic of the salvation of the righteous pagan is in fact one of the themes

¹²⁴ Peterson 1977, 11-15; Grady 1992.

¹²⁵ See 3.7 for the legend.

addressed by Wyclif, whose thought was central to the entire Lollard movement. On the basis of the passage of the Epistle to the Romans (8:28-30), the theologian theorized that only to the predestined salvation is granted, and therefore the Church has no role or power. Only God knows who is in his grace. The theological dispute is part of the ecclesiological question on the role of the Church as an institution and on the value of the sacraments. This issue is focal through the fourteenth century, in particular with the English movement of the Lollards. The debate concerned both the necessity of the sacraments for the salvation of the soul and the importance of the priest in his role of celebrant. According to the heterodox position, the sacraments could not bring any change in the state of being, at most they had a symbolic meaning, because only God could dispense grace. As a result, the sacraments and the institution of the Church were deprived of any spiritual function of salvation or intercession. This is probably the cultural context in which the poem was written: the movement of the Lollards rising in reply to the heterodox thought of Wyclif. From the Cathedral of St. Paul, after the revolt of 1381, Braybrooke, defender of orthodoxy, spoke several times, standing against the Londoners who sympathized with Wyclif. In reply, they were posted anti-clerical posters of heterodoxy. During the fourteenth century, the Lollards became such a problem for the administration of the cathedral that a tower was designated on the ground of St. Paul for the examination and imprisonment of radical exponents. The cathedral and its churchyard, as a consequence, constituted the place of confrontation between heterodoxy and orthodoxy. Therefore the poet's choice to collocate the discovery of the tomb and the miracle right in the cathedral may not be accidental. It is likely that the narrative is set within the religious debate of the time.¹²⁶ Of course, at the beginning of the poem, Erkenwald is presented as "byschop in þat burghe blessyd and sacryd" (3). The intention to emphasize his presence in the story as a representative of Church as an institution is clear from the way the poet refers to him: the protagonist is mentioned by his name only four times (l. 4, *Saynt Erkenwolde*, l. 32, *Erkenwolde*, l. 105, *Sir Erkenwolde*, l. 117, *Ser Erkenwolde*), while he is just "þe byschop" for fifteen times (ll. 32, 65, 104, 110, 128, 141, 158, 192, 220, 256, 264, 272, 310, 326, 338) or "þe prelate" (ll. 129, 137) or "þe primate" (l. 104). Moreover, it is by the intervention of Erkenwald, as a churchman, bishop, and officiant, that the corpse is brought back to life. In particular, the saint is able to order the corpse to reveal its own identity by virtue of its role as an intermediary of the will of God, which is granted to

¹²⁶ Hudson 1988; Chism 2002.

him by his official office in the Church, represented by his clothes as well as the celebration of mass:

And þat in fastynge of þour faithe and of fyne bileue.
I shal auay þow so verrayly of vertues His
þat þe may leue vpon longe þat He is Lord myȝty,
And fayne þour talent to fulfille if þe Hym frende leues.”
Then he turnes to þe toumbe and talkes to þe corce,
Lyftande vp his eghe-lyddes he loused suche wordes:
“Now lykham þat þer lies, layne þou no lenger;
Sythen Jhesus has iuggit to-day His ioy to be schewyde,
Be þou bone to His bode, I bydde in His behalue.
As He was bende on a beme quen He His blode schedde,
As þou hit wost wyterly and we hit wele leuen,
Ansuare here to my sawe, councele no trouthe.
Sithen we wot not qwo þou art witere vs þiselwen
In worlde quat weghe þou was and quy þow þus ligges,
How longe þou has layne here and quat laghe þou vsyt
Queþer art þou ioyned to ioy opir iuggid to þyne.”
Quen þe segge hade þus sayde and syked þer-after,
þe bryȝt body in þe burynes brayed a litelle
And wyt a drery dreme he dryues owte wordes,
Purghe sum Goste lant lyfe of hym þat al redes.¹²⁷

The poet insists on precise points: the figure of Erkenwald as a bishop; the rituals of mass, of the prayer and of the invocation as essential to understand the identity of the corpse; the sacrament of baptism officiated by a churchman as the necessary condition to free the soul. For these elements, for a long time, many critics have read the poem as a non-hagiographic text, but rather as a political work in defence of the theological and ecclesiological orthodoxy, in opposition to the positions of Wyclif and the Lollards. Among these, Whatley defines it as a conservative and reactionary representation of the motive of the virtuous pagan, by which the righteous heathen needs the sacramental mediation of the Church for his salvation, thus opposing to *Piers Plowman*, which faces the same theme. In fact, in *Piers Plowman* emphasis is given to good actions rather than to the sacraments.¹²⁸ The discussion shall be partially reprised later in 3.8, since it may be useful for the conclusions.

¹²⁷ Peterson 1977, lines 173-192

¹²⁸ Whatley 1986, 338, Vezzosi 2019, 194-198. For a complete comparison between *Saint Erkenwald* and *Piers Plowman*, see Grady 1992.

3.5 The dialect of the poem

The dialect of the poem, as we read it in the manuscript, is agreed by scholars to be that of the North-West Midlands. Mary S. Serjeantson, in 1927, has been the first to examine it. She concluded that it was the dialect of the West Midland and that the poem was written in Cheshire, between Chester and Northwich.

Oakden, however, noticed that the Old English $\bar{e}o$ as e in the poem is not a western, but a northern and eastern feature. In *Erkenwald*, OE $\bar{e}o$ is indeed usually present as e , as line 45 *erthe* (OE *eorðe*), but Oakden apparently ignored line 171 *glow* (OE *glēow*), and lines 258, 340 *worthe* (OE *weorðan*). The principal basis of his disagreement with Cheshire as the location of the poem's dialect was the scribe's consistent use of *qu-* to indicate OE *hw-* (as *quere*, 279, OE *hwær*). For this reason, Oakden places *Erkenwald* more northerly than *Gawain*. In fact in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and in the other poems of the Cotton Nero manuscript there is not such a consistent use of *qu-*, which, on the contrary, *Erkenwald* employs frequently. Since he considered the development of *qu-* from OE *hw-* as a characteristically northern event, occurring mainly north of the Ribble, which crosses central Lancashire, Oakden suggested an area near the Ribble as the possible location of the *Erkenwald* scribe.

However, Oakden also suggested that the presence of the shift of OE $\bar{e}o$ to e , instead of a rounded vowel, cannot be considered sure evidence to prove that a text is not western, although the shift was more common in the north and in the East Midlands. Moreover, he pointed out that Mirk and Audelay, both western writers, used either e or u for OE $\bar{e}o$. Oakden may have judged the language of *Erkenwald* according to the supposed date of its composition, 1386, instead of the date of the scribe's work, 1477. By the latter date, the spread of what would ultimately become standard forms may have caused the scribe to use e , excluding the rounded forms. Anyway, e was widely used in western areas, including Cheshire, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The standardization already at work in the fourteenth century was more spread in the late fifteenth century when *Erkenwald* was written down. Oakden accepted Cheshire as the manuscript's location, except for the consistent use of *qu-* for OE *hw-*. Yet, this is a scribal point, not phonological, because, for instance, at line 186 the alliteration of *qu* with *w-* occurs. Of course, this practice tends to be a northern feature, but is not exclusive of that region. Documents of the first half of the fifteenth century from south of the Ribble show *qu-* forms alongside *wh-*. There is also a deed of the period of Henry IV in which the king, as lord of Congleton in Cheshire, granted Whately in Congleton to "Arthur de Squetinham" and "Roger de Squetinham". Surely

the sound represented by *squ* is /sw/. Assumed this, it is difficult to argue that one text is more northerly than another only on the basis of the greater frequency of one form, a form found elsewhere than in the northern area to which the text is assigned.¹²⁹

Savage, in his edition, accepted the dialect of the poem as North-West Midland, but additionally, stated that traces of East Midland dialect are present in the text. Savage suggested that there is a possibility that the poem was written in the East Midlands and copied by a West Midland scribe, reporting the following as distinctively East Midland characteristics:

1. OE *ēo* appears as *e* in the greater number of cases, rather than as a rounded vowel.
2. OE *y* appears in the majority of cases as *y* or *i*, rather than as a rounded vowel.
3. OE *a + n* (or *m*) is occasionally written *a + n* (*m*) instead of *o + n* (*m*).

The first feature is not distinctively East Midland, as just seen with Oakden's study. Savage also noted that OE *y* appears a number of times as *u*. While both East Midland and northern texts are likely to show unrounded forms, no argument can be made that the presence of unrounded forms in a West Midland text is a trace of East Midland influence. The same for the third case: the use of *o* before a nasal is common in the west, and *a* before a nasal is usually associated with eastern texts, but both forms are found in numerous western works of the period. There is no reason to suppose an East Midland element in the dialect of the poem.¹³⁰

In conclusion, the place where *Erkenwald* may have been composed has been individuated almost immediately. The discussion developed with the linguistic analyses regarding the *qu*-feature and phonological mutation of the Old English *ēo* to *e* or its rounding. This initially led to retain that the poem was northern and not western, but it has been confuted since both these characteristics were widespread for the linguistic standardization around when the manuscript was copied. In addition, there is no evidence that *Erkenwald* received some influence from the East Midland dialect, but rather it is thought that it was written in the North-West Midland one, the same dialect of the manuscript. This is one of the most focal points of the discussion on the attribution to the *Gawain*-poet for the authorship of the poem. However, as pointed in section 1.3, it is more likely that the Cottonian poems were written in in a more southerly dialect than of

¹²⁹ See Oakden 1930, 25-28, 85-88; Chambers and Daunt 1931, 220-2, 264 for further information on the discussion with more examples.

¹³⁰ Savage 1926, xxxvii-xxxix. The theory of Savage, even if false in the end, is useful to confirm that those features he proposes actually are common to other dialects.

the North-West Midland one, in the dialect of the Staffordshire. Therefore, even if Oakden's theory was not completely correct, the final result is. So, *Erkenwald's* compositional location was probably further northwards, Cheshire, than the supposed original location of the Cottonian poems.

3.6 The meter of *Saint Erkenwald*

Saint Erkenwald is part of the Alliterative Revival. The meter of the poem is in fact the unrhymed alliterative long line, like *Cleanness*, *Patience* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The metrical practice in this and other alliterative poems of the period is flexible, and it is apparent that the poet was free to adapt the basic rhythms to his own purposes. As any alliterative verse poem, the meter of *Erkenwald* follows the six rules exposed by Duggan (2.2.1). Within the half-lines, three basic rhythms occur: rising, falling, and clashing. In the first, the lifts follow the dips, and the half-line ends on a lift. Thus line 5 a-verse is scanned:

/ /
In his time in þat toun

Falling rhythm is the reverse, as line 20 a-verse:

/ /
Mahoun to Saynt Margrete

Clashing rhythm involves two lifts which are not separated by dips, as line 304 b-verse:

/ /
þat after right hungride

The first two types are often combined to form the most common rhythm, the rising-falling, as in line 9 a-verse:

/ /
Pai bete oute þe Bretons

The metrical pattern of many half-lines is obscured by the value of final *-e*, whether it was pronounced and formed part of the metrical pattern. It is impossible to be certain about the scansion of half-lines that end with an ambiguous final *-e*, or in which lifts are separated only by a final *-e*.

The basic alliterative pattern tends to alliterate the initial sound of the lifts of the first half-line with the initial sound of the first lift of the second half-line, with the final lift monalliterating, therefore it is a pattern of aa/ax. Over 80% of the lines *Erkenwald* follow this pattern (or aaa/ax) in their primary alliteration, as in lines 228 and 231:

/ / / /

And in my power þis place | was putte al to-geder

/ / / / /

Þe folke was felonse and fals | and frowarde to reule

There are also variations to the basic aa/ax pattern. For instance, aa/aa in lines 31 and 264:

/ / / /

Þe thrid temple hit was tolde | of Triapolitanes

/ / / /

How hit myȝt lye, by monnes lore, | and last so longe

In addition, there are single cases, like line 46, with the pattern aaa/aax:

/ / / / / /

Þai founden fourmyt on a flore | a ferly faire tounge

The poet frequently uses the second syllable in a word to carry the alliterating sound, when the first is an unstressed prefix or part of the root, as in lines 80, 140, and 66:

/ / / /

And a gurdille of golde | bigripide his mydelle

/ / / /

Men vnclosid hym þe cloyster | wyt clustrede keies

/ / / /
By assent of þe sextene | þe sayntuare þai kepten

On the contrary, alliteration may occur in an initial but unstressed syllable, as in line 139:

/ / / /
As riche reuestid as he was | he rayked to þe tounge

In Old English verse, certain consonant clusters were treated as units and alliterated only with themselves, for instance *sp* and *st*. The poet of *Saint Erkenwald* generally followed this practice, but he ignored it too, alliterating the *sp* cluster with *s* alone (132):

Of Spiritus Domini for His spede | on sutile wise

The poet often treated other clusters as a unit, but was not strict in his practice. In lines 41 and 126, *gr* alliterates only with itself, but with *g* in line 48. *Ch* is a unit in line 18, and *cr* in line 2, but the latter is alliterated with *c* in lines 14, 16. *Dr* alliterates with itself in line 91, but with *d* in line 236; *cl* with itself in 81, but with *c* in 263. *Sl* alliterates with *s* in line 92, although it is possible to consider this a case of “double rhyme”, a pattern of aa/bb:

As he in sounde sodanly | were slippide opon slepe

Vowels alliteration is common, and *h* alliterates with them. However, *h* can also alliterate with itself, even if more rarely (166):

Pat alle þe hondes vnder heuen halde myzt neuer

Considerable use is made of alliteration for other than strictly metrical purposes, for instance when the poet employs a secondary alliterative scheme based on a different sound from that of the primary alliteration. The primary alliteration can be enclosed in the second one (23):

So *he hom dedifiet* and *dyght* | alle to *dere halowes*

The secondary alliteration can alternate with the primary (68), or be parallel (93):

Pai wolde loke on þat lome | quat lengyd wyttinne¹³¹
Per was *spedeles space* to *spyr* vch on *opir*

A feature of some alliterative poems in Middle English, also found in Old English verse, is the practice of linking lines using the stressed, but non-alliterating sound of the final lift of a line to provide the alliteration on the next line (12-3):

Til Saynt Austyn into Sandewiche | was sende fro þe pope;
Den *prechyd* he here þe *pure faythe* | and *plantyd* þe *trouthe*

There are also cases where the word is directly repeated (162-3):

Quen Hym luste to vnlouke | þe leste of His *myztes*.
Bot quen *matyd* is *monnes myzt* and his *mynde passyde*

There are fifteen examples of this kind of pairs. If this linking is a poetic technique, an anticipation in one line of the metrical scheme of the following one, then it is remarkable the use of a parallel technique: the echoing in the final non-alliterating lift of the second line of a pair of the alliteration of the first line (6-7):

Was *drawen doun*, þat one *dole*, | to *dedifie new*,
For hit hethen had bene | in Hengyst *dawes*

The *d* of line 6 is picked up as an echo at the end of line 7. The technique is carried on for three lines in lines 31-33:

Be thrid temple hit was *tolde* of *Triapolitanes*,
By alle *Bretaynes bonkes* were *bot othire twayne*.
Now of þis *Augustynes art* is *Erkenwolde bischop* ¹³²

¹³¹ Notice that *qu-* alliterates with *w*.

¹³² All the lines of *Saint Erkenwald* have been taken from Peterson's edition (1977).

There are thirteen examples of echoes of previous sounds, and a few more if we consider the vowel alliterations. It is fair to notice that these techniques may be accidents, but, however, considering the length of the poem, they are such frequent patterns that make me suppose the conscious use of them by the poet.¹³³

3.7 The sources

About Saint Erkenwald, many prose lives in Latin have been written. The most notable among them is the earliest one, that present in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (iv, 6). Anyway, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, many legends on Erkenwald circulated. For instance, John of Tymouth's *De Erkenwaldo*, William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, and the unknown *Miracula sancti Erkenwaldi* and *Vita sancti Erkenwaldi Londoniensis Episcopi* celebrate the transference of the body of the saint to St. Paul.¹³⁴ It is likely that the poet knew all these *vitae*, but did not use them, for none of these prose texts mentions the miracle made by Erkenwald in the poem. Observing the plot of the poems, it is possible to notice that in Middle Ages, from the eighth century, a similar legend circulated, in which Pope Gregory the Great baptizes the Roman Emperor Trajan. One day, when alive, the Emperor was approached by a widow who lost her son, murdered probably by Trajan's soldiers (in some versions by his own son). The woman begged for justice against his slayer, and the Emperor rendered it (in the same version in which the murderer is Trajan's son, this is given to the widow as compensation). At the time of Gregory, the Pope passes by Trajan's tomb, remembering of the pagan's justice. As Erkenwald, Gregory cries for the condemned soul of the Emperor, and prays for its release. In a dream, Gregory becomes aware that his prayers have been listened to and that Trajan has been saved and now he is in Heaven. These examples of righteous pagans, condemned only for their lack of knowledge of the grace of God, were very common. Remarkable is the presence of Trajan among the virtuous heathens in Dante's *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Striking is the commentary on Dante by Jacopo della Lana, who refers the same episode on Trajan and Gregory with the same details of *Saint Erkenwald*: the tomb uncovered during an excavation (in Rome in Gregory's episode), the splendid tomb, the intact corpse which wakes up and speaks after the command by the bishop, the baptism, and the subsequent intercession of the saint. The original story is also mentioned in *Piers Plowman*, texts B and C,

¹³³ See Borroff 1962, 187; Savage 1926; Oakden 1930, 154; Peterson 1977, 30-35 for further features on the meter of *Saint Erkenwald*. I have chosen those, according to me, significant for the analysis.

¹³⁴ For information on the biography of the saint, see Peterson 1977, 35-38.

demonstrating that the story was well known in England. Another similar story is accounted by Bede, who relates in the life of Saint Cuthbert of Northumbria that the tomb of Cuthbert was open eleven years after his death, and his body and vestments were found perfectly preserved. As in Trajan's account by Jacopo della Lana or in *Erkenwald*, the bishop, Eadberht, goes to the site of the miracle. Anyway, the story reported in the poem is not present in the historical or literary sources about the saint. The poem is rather a reinterpretation of the Trajan's legend.¹³⁵ At the beginning of the poem, in order to collocate chronologically the facts of *Erkenwald*, more historical facts are mentioned: the coming of Hengist and of Augustin, the quarrels between Belin and his brother, and so on. Scholars think that the poet may have read and cited extensively the *Chronica Majora*, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, or other chronicle sources.¹³⁶

The last remarkable source which the poet probably used is the liturgy of the church, in particular the liturgy for Ascension Day and Pentecost, or Whitsun. His use of liturgy provides a structural and theological basis for much of the poem.¹³⁷ An interesting fact is that the poet used mainly liturgies based on the Psalms and on Mark, therefore different biblical texts compared to the poet of the Cottonian poems, which chose as main source Matthew, besides the stories from the books of the Old Testament. Of great importance are the Psalms 14 and 23, but this topic shall be faced later.

3.8 The authorship of *Saint Erkenwald*

The issue of the authorship of *Saint Erkenwald* focuses on the so-called *Gawain*-poet, the hypothetic and unknown author of *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. As said in 3.1, for a long time it was believed that the five poems were written by the same author, although the legend of the saint stands in another manuscript and presents different features, if compared to the Cottonian poems. This topic, in the last years, has been abandoned by the majority of scholars, even though there is who still believe in it. Then, I shall discuss the

¹³⁵ See Hulbert 1918-1919, 488. In addition, see Hibbard 1919-20, 669-78: she proposes a continental version of the story of Saint Erkenwald, which I found useless for this study, since the account differs in the contents.

¹³⁶ See Savage 1926 for the suggestion on the *Chronica Majora*; see Gollancz 1922 for the hypothesis on *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Anyway, both the scholars state that in the poet's period a number of historical sources circulated. So, even if the two cited works seem to be the most employed by the *Erkenwald*'s author, it cannot be excluded that other minor sources had been used.

¹³⁷ See Peterson 1977, 45. He stresses on the image of God and of the Holy Ghost emerging from these liturgies.

most relevant argumentations, confuting or supporting the theories with pieces of evidence found through the entire study.

The theory was born at the end of the nineteenth century for the inscriptions in both the manuscripts reporting the family name Massey. I think that enough has been said about the hypothesis on the common authorship based on these inscriptions, even considering that, on the one hand, the inscriptions may refer to two different men, and that, on the other hand, there is no evidence to assume that the name Massey refers to the author of the poems. It is more reasonable to believe that the volumes belonged to one or more Masseys in some stage of the history of the manuscripts.

After the discovery of the Massey inscriptions, the first philological study was made by Trautmann. This work was mainly based on the vocabulary and on the meter of the five poems (once it was believed that *Pearl* was an alliterative verse poem too)¹³⁸, and the final assumption was that they were written by the same man. In his edition of *Erkenwald*, Savage was the first to provide as arguments based on similarities on style, theme, and phraseology, concluding that the author was the same for all the five texts, as Trautmann did. In particular, he argued that *Erkenwald* 171 and *Patience* 164 show the same phrase. Respectively:

Bot glow we alle opon Godde
Bot vchon glewed on his god

Again, *Erkenwald* 161 and *Cleanness* 195:

Towarde þe prouidens of þe prince þat paradys weldes
þat þat ilk proper Prynce þat paradys weldez

In addition, Savage affirmed that the Cotton Nero poems and *Erkenwald* present similarities concerning the perspective on religious themes and the style, in particular in the periphrases regarding God.¹³⁹ After Savage's edition, few scholars began to dissent, arguing against the attribution of common authorship for *Erkenwald* and the Cottonian poems. The first noteworthy scholar among this group was J. W. Clark, in the 1950s. He, studying the vocabulary of the five

¹³⁸ See 2.2.2.

¹³⁹ Trautmann and Savage's theories have lost of validity mainly for the formulaic nature of the alliterative verse poems.

poems, notes that only a little group of words can be considered unique of the *Gawain*-poet, and that certain terms appear with different senses, or even words considered equal actually are two different terms.¹⁴⁰ Because of these proofs, Clark asserts the different authorship of the five poems. However, his objections are not so relevant, since a poet can use the same words with more meanings, and even more irrelevant is the fact that certain words may not be unique of one poet. In fact, my position is shared by most of the scholarship, even by who affirms that *Erkenwald* was not a composition of the *Gawain*-poet. Yet, for one thing it must be given credit to Clark: studies exclusively on vocabulary are not reliable, since much of the language used in Middle English poems, in particular those in alliterative verse, was shared by poets, and it is relevant to consider that those poets composed employing a formulaic language, and, therefore, even the use of certain periphrases cannot be considered as evidence. For this reason, Trautmann and Savage's studies are not reliable.

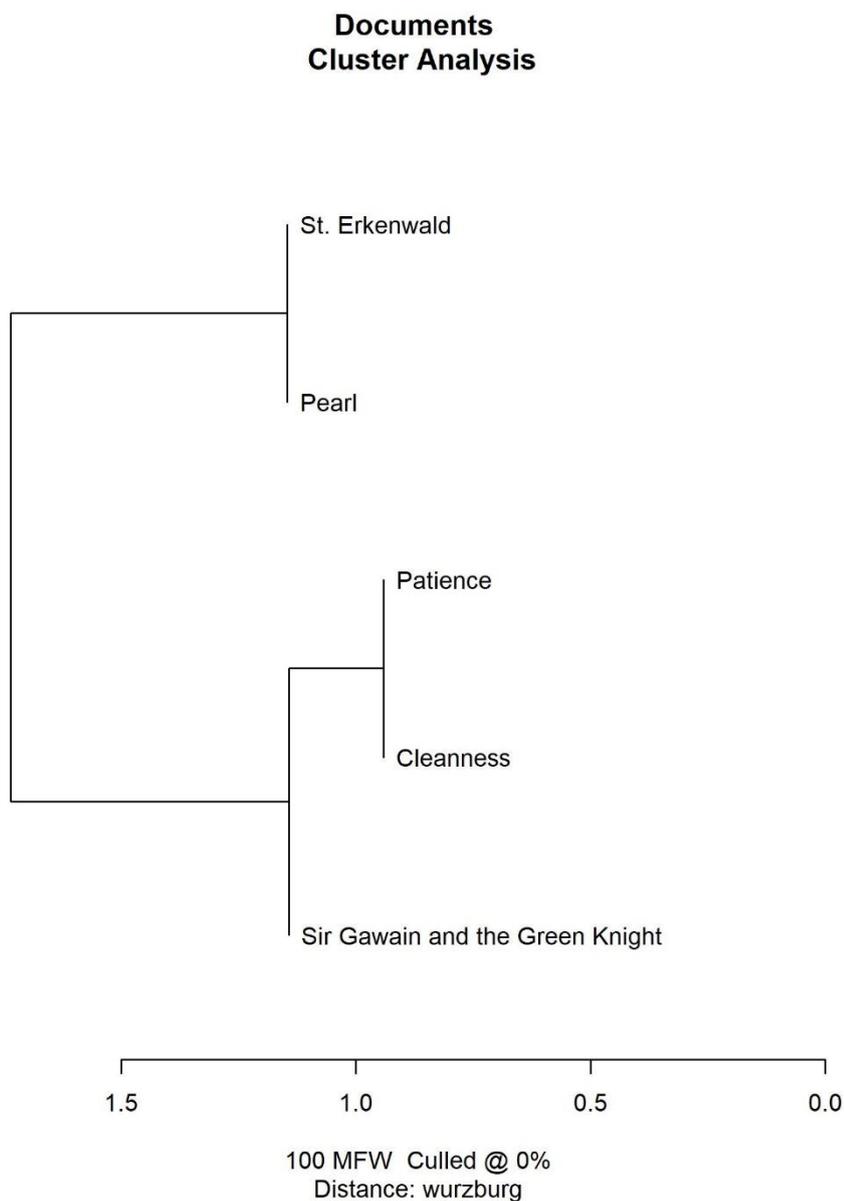
The most important study about *Erkenwald*'s authorship has been made by Benson. He analysed all the five poems in matter of style, versification, vocabulary, and phrases, recognizing similarities between the four poems of the Cotton Nero manuscript, and excluding the possibility that *Saint Erkenwald* was written by the same hand of the other four texts. Even if his article is acknowledged as one of the most accurate, sometimes, in his considerations, he is a bit rushed, for instance, affirming that the absolute constructions are a remarkable trait of the *Gawain*-poet. Of course, the poet made a considerable use of this kind of structures, but it is not a particular peculiarity of the Cottonian poems. Anyway, this article has been a relevant breakthrough in the discussion on common authorship.¹⁴¹

Given the theoretical basis for the discussion of the common authorship, now I shall try to prove, by comparison, that the Cotton Nero's poems were written by a different author, and not by the same of *Saint Erkenwald*. I will follow the same order of analysis employed for the comparison of *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Gawain*.

¹⁴⁰ See Clark 1951. In particular, Clark answered a study of Oakden, supporter of the common authorship, though not convinced by certain aspects. Anyway, Clark objected against the presence of fifty unique words in the poems, affirming that only twelve are unique. As regards the words with different meanings, he proposes the term *thryuandy*, which means "worthily" in *Cleanness* and *Erkenwald*, while in *Gawain* "heartily". Instead, *mansed* would represent two different terms in *Cleanness* and *Gawain*. Anyway, other elements have been discussed by Clark.

¹⁴¹ Benson 1965. For instance, he demonstrates that, actually, only three words are in common between *Erkenwald* and the Cotton Nero's poems, or that, while the Cottonian poems use absolute constructions linked to the end of the sentence, *Erkenwald* does not

As for the Cottonian poems, with Stylo R¹⁴², we can make a first hypothesis on the relationship of the five texts, based on the frequency of the recurring items:



¹⁴² Eder, Rybicki and Kestemont 2006. Stylo is a R package which provides implementations of various established analyses in the field of computational stylistics. The package is useful for the high-level analysis of writing style in stylometry. Stylometry (computational stylistics) is concerned with the quantitative study of writing style, for instance, authorship verification, an application which has considerable potential in forensic contexts, as well as historical research.

As in 2.3.1, I have picked up the vocabulary of the whole corpus, excluding pronouns, possessive adjectives, conjunctions, and prepositions, those items occurring too frequently in the texts and in the entire Middle English tradition. Their high frequency through the texts would affect the result of the analysis. More interesting is the usage of verbs (including modals and auxiliaries), nouns, adjectives (and more in general modifiers). The analysis of these elements should provide us a reliable result.

The differences in style are already visible from the chart: as in 2.3, *Patience* and *Cleanness* are directly linked, but now it is clear that *Gawain* belongs to the same branch as well. But on the contrary, what catches the eye is a supposed relationship between *Pearl* and *Erkenwald*. However, this result is objectionable by a scrupulous analysis of the vocabulary, since it is possible to observe that terms frequently used in all the Cotton manuscript are absent in *Erkenwald*:

- Verbs: *abyde, deme, folze, let, nym, wax*;
- Auxiliaries: *con, mot*;
- Modifiers: *away, big, blipe, far, like, schyre, swipe*;
- Nouns: *clannesse, cortaysye, fylpe, last, point, syzt, trawpe, þing, won, worschip*.

Besides the fact that in *Erkenwald* certain common verbs and modifiers do not appear, striking is the absence of *clannesse, cortaysye, and trawpe*, focal terms in the Cotton manuscript, and *fylpe*, used frequently in opposition of *clannesse* and *trawpe*. Instead, *Erkenwald* does not lack (at least not at all) of the set of synonyms for “man”, including *tulk*, which occurs only once (109):

Tulkes tolden hym þe tale wyt troubulle in þe pepul

But while *tulk* is present in the text, *burne, gome, schalk, wyze* are not. Together with *tulk*, only *hathel* (198), *lede* (146, 200, 315), *segge* (100, 159) may be found. Moreover, these words are employed with their common sense, in order to refer to men. This common usage is also present in the *Gawain*-poems, but, as it has been noticed in 2.3.1, they are used in periphrases which refer to God or Christ too. This does never happen in *Erkenwald*, which uses only *prynce* and *kyng* as head-words in the periphrases. More in general, the poet of *Erkenwald* employs a small

and conventional vocabulary for the members of the Trinity, words typical of all the religious works: *Kyng, Prynce, Lord, Jhesus, Sauyoure, Maker of men, Father, Child, Holy Ghost*. On the contrary, the poem of the Harley manuscript shows up four periphrases on God (or more in general, on one member of the Trinity, since in *Erkenwald* the Holy Spirit is cited many times) that in the four poems of the Cotton Nero A.x do not exist:

Purghe sum Goste lant lyfe of hym þat al redes	192
Bot þe riche kyng of reson þat riȝt euer allowes	267
He has lant me to last þat loues ryȝt best.	272
He þat rewardes vche a renke as he has riȝt seruyd	275

Anyway, the other periphrases on God common to the Cottonian poems and the saint's legend are frequent in all the tradition.

In a similar way, the poems show a different use of vocabulary for the mortal characters. In *Erkenwald*, there is a large variety of synonyms for "man", feature typical of the alliterative poems, but they are addressed to minor characters. The protagonist, instead, is called by his name, *biscop, prelate* or *primate*, while the pagan judge is mentioned as *body, mon, cors*. Differently, the *Gawain*-poet employs all the terms already mentioned, included those that do not appear in *Erkenwald*, but also *renk*. It could be objected that the poem of *Erkenwald* is shorter than all the other four poems, and for this reason it cannot be proved the difference of style. However, in few stanzas in *Sir Gawain* (536-89), the poet uses seven different synonyms for Gawain, more than those used for both *Erkenwald* and the judge in all the poem; in *Cleanness* (601-88) eight for Abraham; in *Pearl* (157-240) seven for the Maiden.¹⁴³ Probably, the only feature that can be attributable to the length of the poem is the alliteration of *h* with itself: in the *Gawain*-poems it is rather frequent, while in *Erkenwald* appears few times, yet for this case it may be due to its 351 lines.

Another lacking element in *Erkenwald* is the frame: while all the four Cottonian poems have a frame that opens and closes each single poem, *Erkenwald* has only an introduction at the beginning with a contextualization of the period in which the facts of poem are placed, by indication of some relevant historical moments. However, whether the poem opens with such context, it closes differently, that is linked to the central episode.

¹⁴³ Benson 1965.

As regards the contents, *Erkenwald* lacks all the main themes of the Cottonian poems, in particular those related to *trawþe*, *clannesse*, and *cortaysye*, evidenced also by the fact that these words never appear in the text. But the idea of God is different too for certain aspects: looking at the periphrases, God, in *Erkenwald*, is the Judge of men, while in the *Gawain*-poems is a majestic superhuman figure who wields the world. In *Erkenwald*, God is named “þe riche kyng of resone” (266) who brings justice and loves the laws of truth, honouring the men who lived with the ideal of justice. For this reason, God do not let the body of the pagan judge corrupt for thirteen hundred years. For this topic, lines 266-9 are significant in *Erkenwald*:

Bot þe riche kyng of reson þat riȝt euer allowes
 And loues al þe lawes lely þat longen to trouthe.
 And moste he menskes men for mynnyng of riȝtes
 Þen for al þe meritorie medes þat men on molde vsen

The idea of God as judge in these lines is linked to what occurs in Psalms 15 (14) and 24 (23). Only *Pearl* may connect with this idea of God, since it quotes the same Psalms, and, as we shall see soon, this feature may connect the texts, although not for the authorship.

Again, an apparent similar perspective is that of the merciful God present in *Patience*, even if God himself behaves differently in the two poems, and the reasons for his mercy are distinct: in *Patience*, he is a positive exemplum, being generous even with the wrathful Jonah; in *Erkenwald*, his mercy arrives for the justice and the devotion of men, in particular after the bishop prays him for the pagan judge, so not automatically as in *Patience*. In addition, whether both the poets knew the scriptures and the liturgies, even if using them quite differently for the purpose of their messages, the *Gawain*-poet seemed to know better the secular society, in particular the courtly life, than the *Erkenwald*-poet, who focused mainly on the tradition of the lives of the saints. However, without knowing other works by this poet, his culture and interests cannot be assumed for sure.

Though *Saint Erkenwald* and the Cottonian poems were written by different authors, it is possible that they communicate with one another. In particular, both *Pearl* and *Erkenwald* allude to the same Psalms, as already said. In 3.4. it was discussed the fact that *Erkenwald* was composed during the theological debate on the role of the Church and the value of the sacraments, which were questioned by the heterodox movements. In that section, it was claimed the position of the *Erkenwald*-poet, a supporter of the orthodoxy, and it was mentioned a discrepancy between

Erkenwald and *Piers Plowman*, since, respectively, one poem affirms the salvation by the sacraments, and the other by the good actions. However, the well-known Psalms link these two texts.

15 (14)

¹ Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent?
Who may live on your holy mountain?
² The one whose walk is blameless,
who does what is righteous,
who speaks the truth from their heart;
³ whose tongue utters no slander,
who does no wrong to a neighbour,
and casts no slur on others;
⁴ who despises a vile person
but honours those who fear the Lord;
who keeps an oath even when it hurts,
and does not change their mind;
⁵ who lends money to the poor without interest;
who does not accept a bribe against the
innocent.
Whoever does these things
will never be shaken.

24 (23)

¹ The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it;
² for he founded it on the seas
and established it on the waters.
³ Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord?
Who may stand in his holy place?
⁴ The one who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not trust in an idol
or swear by a false god.
⁵ They will receive blessing from the Lord
and vindication from God their Saviour.
⁶ Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek your face, God of Jacob.
⁷ Lift up your heads, you gates;
be lifted up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
⁸ Who is this King of glory?
The Lord strong and mighty,
the Lord mighty in battle.
⁹ Lift up your heads, you gates;
lift them up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
¹⁰ Who is he, this King of glory?
The Lord Almighty –
he is the King of glory.¹⁴⁴

The ideals listed in *Erkenwald*, lines 266-269, qualify God as a judge of the practice of earthly justice, linking this section of the poem to the Psalms, which are also mentioned by Conscience

¹⁴⁴ Bible Gateway. <https://www.biblegateway.com/>

in *Piers Plowman* in his speech with Reason to the King, in order to dissuade him from marrying Lady Meed and False: the phrase “þe riche kyng of resone, þat riȝt euer allowes” recalls the concept provided by Conscience: “wiþ right and wiþreson” (“with justice and reason”). The saint rationally assumes that the soul is in a state of bliss (*in sele*, “in beatitude”) and has been redeemed, because the pagan judge has always behaved uprightly, and God rewards men according to their degree of justice in life:

Quere is ho stablid and stadde if þou so streȝt wroghtes?
He þat rewardes vche a renke as he has riȝt seruyd
Myȝt euel forgo the to gyfe of His grace summe brawnche,

For as He says in His sothe psalmyde writtes:
“Þe skilfulle and þe vnskathely skelton ay to me”.
Forþi say me of þi soule in sele quere ho wonnes
And of þe riche restorment þat raȝt hyr oure Lorde.¹⁴⁵

And if *Saint Erkenwald* dialogues with *Piers Plowman* in terms of *right* as opposed to *reson*, that, respectively, corresponds to *juge* as opposed to *byschop*, in the quotation of the Psalm “Þe skilfulle and þe vnskathely skeltone ay to me” (l. 278), it connects to *Pearl*, since here too there is a paraphrase of the two Psalms (ll. 589-600)¹⁴⁶:

Then more I meled and sayde apert:
“Me þynk þy tale vn resoun able:
Goddez ryȝt is redy and euer mor rert,
Oþer holy wryt is bot afable
In sauter is sayd averce ouerte
Þat spekez apoynt determinable:
“Þou quytez vchon as hys desserte,

¹⁴⁵ Peterson 1977, lines 274-80).

¹⁴⁶ Vezzosi 2019, 200-1. In her article, Vezzosi’s arguments are correct only partially, because, as she exposes, there are connections between the poem of the saint and *Pearl* for the theological discussion on salvation, which the poets base on Psalms. However, she maintains that the message of the two poems is the same, assuming, thus, that even the authorship may be common. However, she links the ideals of *Saint Erkenwald* to the conception of faith and salvation of the Dreamer in *Pearl*, for which the man is blamed by the Maiden, since it is not the real doctrine, God’s message (and the *Gawain*-poet’s message too).

Pou hyze Kyng ay pertermynable”.
Now he þat stod þe long day stable,
And þou to payment com hym byfore,
Penne þe lasse in werke to take more able,
And euer þe lenger þe lasse þe more.

The part cited is taken from the dialogue between the Dreamer and the Maiden, when the man acknowledges his lost pearl, her daughter, and asks her why she is in Heaven, since she died too young and, as a matter of fact, did not make good actions in order to deserve the access in Paradise. Basically, the Dreamer considers this an injustice, because she has not proved to be righteous in her lifetime. As we know, the Maiden blames the Dreamer for this idea, typical of mortals. In fact, she is in Heaven for God’s grace and because she died baptized and *clene*. It is striking the passage after the Parable, when she clearly quotes again those Psalms:

Grace innogh þe mon may haue
þat synnez þenne new, ʒif hym repente,
bot with sorʒ and syt he mot hit craue,
and byde þe payne þer to is bent.
Bot Resoun, of ryʒt þat con not raue,
saez euer more þe innosseent;
hit is a dom þat neuer God gaue
þat euer þe gyltlez schulde be schente.
Þe gyltyf may contryssyoun hente
and be þurʒ mercy to grace þryʒt;
bot he to gyle þat neuer glente
as inoscente is saf and ryʒte.

Ryʒt þus þus I knaw wel in þis cas
two men to saue is God by skylle:
þe ryʒt wys man schal se hys fille
þe harmlez hapel schal com Hym tulle.
Þe sauter hyt satz þus; in apace:
“Lorde, quo schal klymbe Þy hyʒ hylle,
oþer rest withinne Þy holy place?”
Hymself to on sware he is not dylle:

“Hondelyngez harme þat dyt not ille,
þat is of hert boþe clene and lyzt,
þer schal hys step stable style”:
þe innoſent is ay ſaf by ryzt.

The ryztwys man also, ſertayn,
aproche heſchal þat proper pyle
þat takez not her lyf in vayne
ne glauerez her ineþbor wyth no gyle
of þys ryzt wys ſaz Salamon playn,
Hym Koyntyſe oure con aquyle;
by wayez ful ſtrezt He con him ſtrayn,
and ſcheued hym þe rengne of God awhyle,
as quo ſays “Lo 3on louely yle:
þou may hit wynne if þou be wyzte.”
Bot hardyly with oute peryle,
þe innoſent is ay ſaue by ryzte.¹⁴⁷

What emerges from these lines is that, actually, salvation comes in various ways to men. Even the righteous are saved, as the Psalms say. But even more important are reason (line 665), as in *Piers Plowman*, and purity, that is, cleanness, concept occurring many times through the entire Cottonian manuscript, as we have observed. In my opinion, it is evident that the conception of justice in *Saint Erkenwald*, which should grant salvation, is very similar, or even identical, to the Dreamer’s, while the *Gawain*-poet’s idea is provided by the Maiden, since, in the narrative, that is the truth, God’s truth. As well as being a further proof for the different authorship of *Erkenwald*, this demonstrates that during the second half of the fourteenth century there was a theological debate on the theme of salvation after death, and that this debate was not disputed only politically, theologically, and philosophically, but also poetically. The poets of that period, thus, in different stylistic forms and genres, wrote about their own idea on the topic.¹⁴⁸

In conclusion, the comparison of the five poems demonstrates that *Saint Erkenwald* was not written by the *Gawain*-poet, mainly for a complete difference of style and of contents. Moreover, previously it has been evidenced that the dialect of the *Gawain*-poems is not that used for

¹⁴⁷ Andrew and Waldron 2007, lines 661-96.

¹⁴⁸ For a deeper study on the theology of the poems, see Rhodes 2001.

Erkenwald, though very similar. The only feature which could link the poems is the meter, but, overall, it is not sufficient to demonstrate the common authorship, since it is shared by the tradition of the alliterative verse poems. However, even if there were two different poets, the poems communicate with each other on the theological discussion of their period.

Conclusions

The purpose of this work was that of demonstrating that the common authorship of *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the four poems which fill the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript, can be proved, despite the fact that for each of these poems exists only a copy, that is the texts in the manuscript itself. Nonetheless, by the union of formal and stylistic evidence with the literary evidence (the themes and the contents of the poems), it is possible to believe that the poems were composed by one hand, even if this supposition cannot be completely confirmed for the lack of witnesses. Moreover, after having examined the four Cottonian poems, I have found necessary to study another poem, *Saint Erkenwald*, whose authorship is attributed by some scholars to the so called “Gawain-poet” or “Pearl-poet”, the hypothetic and unknown author of the four poems of the Cotton Nero manuscript. This attribution was due to certain features, first of all the dialect, but also for two inscriptions: one appearing in folio 95^r, the first leaf of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and the other in the bottom centre of folio 13^r of British Library Ms. Harley 2250, the manuscript of *Saint Erkenwald*. These two inscriptions may refer to the family name of the Masseys. Some scholars believed that this name is attributable to the poet, but, since there are no proofs of this, I reject this theory, and I believe that it is more likely that the name belonged to some owners of the manuscripts in a stage of their history. In my opinion, the poem of *Saint Erkenwald* was not written by the same man of the other four poems, and, for this reason, I also wanted to demonstrate this by formal, stylistic, and literary pieces of evidence, comparing the poem from the Harley manuscript with the Cottonian poems. In addition, I have discussed a possible dialogue between these texts on the topic of the salvation by God for the afterlife.

In order to examine the common authorship of *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in the first chapter I provided the characteristics of the manuscript. In 1.1, I have given the physical description of Cotton Nero codex, explaining that for its modest qualities, despite the drawings, it is likely that it was copied from another witness. On palaeographical grounds, the manuscript can be dated back to the second half of the fourteenth century, while the hand of the copyist has not been found in other manuscripts. It is odd that poems from that period fell into oblivion, since *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer were known, despite

being included in the canon and being from the same period. However, the poems circulated, *Sir Gawain* at least, since a later popular readaptation of the poem exists.

In 1.2, I have provided some information on the Alliterative Revival, to which the poet belonged, since *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Gawain* were composed in the alliterative verse, typical of the northern regions of England, despite some exceptions. Instead, *Pearl* was composed with another meter, more used in southern England and in the continent, the iambic tetrameter, though the poem presents alliterations too. In addition, in 1.3, it has been distinguished the dialect of the poet from that of the scribe. The manuscript was likely to have been written in North-West Midlands, Cheshire, while the poem originally might have been written more southerly, in Staffordshire. Probably, these poems were forgotten both for the meter and for the dialect, incomprehensible to the people of London, and were not printed, thus interrupting their circulation.

In the second chapter, through the first section, the four poems of the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript have been first analysed one at a time, highlighting their most relevant features; instead, in the second section, the meter of each poem has been observed. Then, in the third section, after a quantitative analysis with Stylo R (which has provided a first hypothesis of relationship between the texts), the poems have been compared, on the one hand by the formal and stylistic point of view, on the other hand by the literary point of view, that is the themes. What has risen is the employment by all the four poems of common patterns, even if the meter is different, as in *Pearl*. They have been pointed out: the common usage of periphrases for the figures of God and Christ, peculiarity of the *Gawain*-poet for the use of the synonyms of “man” referred to God or Christ, which in the tradition of Middle English poetry, and in particular in the tradition of the alliterative verse poetry, never appear in such contexts; the rather frequent alliteration of *h* with itself; the frame pattern, by which each poem begins in a precise context (respectively, the garden and the foundation of Britain in *Pearl* and in *Sir Gawain*), or with a certain discussion (about *clannesse* in *Cleanness*, and about *pacience* in *Patience*), and closes in that same context or with that discussion; every poem ends with a prayer. For the periphrases and the alliteration in *h*, I have provided some examples.

As regards the literary analysis, the four poems are linked by precise themes: *clannesse*, *trawþe*, and *cortaysye*. The poet seems to stress the attention on morality with these three concepts, particularly in *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Sir Gawain*. In addition, the protagonists of the four texts

are all tested by superhuman figures: the treatment of unequal struggles of human beings against such superhuman beings reflects wry humour and a non-heroic view of humankind. What emerges from these confrontations is the sympathy from the poet for the moral and ethical challenges with which men are tested. Concerning *Patience*, I have argued that the poem is a sort of continuation of *Cleanness*, since, in matter of structure, they are almost identical and propose specular perceptions on God. Moreover, the poems draw out the idea of the author about the state of human beings towards God and the Christian doctrine, but also in the Medieval society of the fourteenth century, featured by the courtly life and knighthood with all their contradictions. Therefore, the results of the combination of the formal and stylistic evidence plus the literary evidence allow us to consider the four Cottonian poems as written by one hand, providing a concrete hypothesis of common authorship, though lacking more than one witness for text.

In the third and last chapter, it has been discussed the matter of *Saint Erkenwald*'s authorship. Similarly to the first chapter, it has been analysed the manuscript of *Erkenwald*, the dialect, and the period of composition. What has emerged is that the dialect of the copyist and that of the poet was the same, of the North-West Midlands, in particular of Cheshire, and while the manuscript was copied in 1477, as indicated in it, the poem might have been composed between 1380 and 1420, more probably between 1388-92, during the dispute on the role of the Church and on the value of the sacraments. Another remarkable characteristic of the poem is that it is the only alliterative verse composition in British Library Ms. Harley 2250.

After the analysis of the meter and of the sources of the poem, it has been possible to make the comparison of *Saint Erkenwald* with the Cottonian poems. It has appeared that the poem, despite the meter, has very little in common with the other four poems. The dialect, even if very similar, is actually different, since *Erkenwald* employs the Cheshire dialect, while the *Gawain*-poet the Staffordshire one. With Stylo R, it has been possible to distinguish the authorship of *Erkenwald* from *Gawain*, *Cleanness* and *Patience*. However, the quantitative analysis indicated a relation between *Erkenwald* and *Pearl*. Nonetheless, the stylistic analysis evidenced substantial differences. Much of the common vocabulary present in the four poems does not belong to *Erkenwald*, in particular some verbs and auxiliaries, but also the three main words of the Cottonian poems; *trawþe*, *clannesse*, and *cortaysye*, involving the absence of those themes so relevant for the *Gawain*-poet. Even the use of the periphrases of God is different: while in the *Gawain*-poems synonyms of "man" are employed for God, in *Erkenwald* they are not. Rather,

they are used with their ordinary meaning. On the contrary, there are four periphrases that are not detectable in the Cottonian poems. Moreover, the variety of vocabulary of the *Gawain*-poet, both for God and for mortal characters, is absent in *Erkenwald*: the fact that in few lines in all the four poems of the Cotton Nero A.x appear more different synonyms than those appearing in the whole text on the life of the saint. From the sources (Mark for the *Erkenwald*-poet, Matthew for the *Gawain*-poet) and from the poems, an evident difference about the perception of God rises. Beside this aspect, the *Gawain*-poems demonstrated a knowledge of the courtly life, or, more in general, of the secular society, which is transposed in Christian topics and contexts too, as in *Pearl*, while the *Erkenwald*-poet was more interested in the tradition of the lives of the saints. With this work it is definitely demonstrated that the poem of *Saint Erkenwald* was not composed by the same unknown author of *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Moreover, it has been evidenced that, even if these poems belong to different authors, there was a communication between them on the theological dispute of the late fourteenth century on salvation. By this additional analysis, with also the support of *Piers Plowman*, it has been found that the poems, in particular *Saint Erkenwald* and *Pearl*, show different conceptions on the topic, where, fundamentally, the *Erkenwald*-poet represented the same ideology of the Dreamer in *Pearl*, based on the concept of justice, while the *Gawain*-poet that of the Pearl-Maiden, based on cleanness.

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